

Zeno of Elea

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Zeno of Elea was a Greek philosopher who lived in the 5th Century BCE. He described a set of paradoxes to prove that space and time are continuous and cannot be divided into discrete parts. The most famous of these are the *Paradox of Achilles and the Tortoise*, which purportedly shows that Achilles could never catch up with the much slower Tortoise, and the *Paradox of the Arrow*, which shows that an arrow in flight is always stationary.

Life of Zeno

Very little is known about the life of Zeno of Elea (Palmer, 2021). Elea, modern-day Velia, was a settlement on the southwest coast of Italy, founded in 540 BCE by Greeks from Phocaea, an Ionian city on the western coast of Anatolia. The Phocians were experienced sailors who had also established colonies in Catalonia and Marseille. The Persian invasion of the Ionian cities drove most of the Phocians toward their colonies, which together with other Greek settlements formed an extensive empire called Magna Grecia. Roman ruins, including the Porta Rosa and a theater have been excavated in Velia:



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A Book of Paradoxes

Zeno wrote a book of forty paradoxes to defend the philosophy of Parmenides (Dowden, 2023). Unfortunately, the book did not survive and all we know about its contents are brief references in later writings by authors who may not have understood Zeno's thinking. A paradox is a logical argument that leads to a conclusion at odds with (*para*, beside or beyond) accepted opinion (*dox*) (Strobach, 2013). A paradox may be used to demonstrate that accepted opinion is wrong, or at least open to contradictory interpretation. However, the usual intent of a paradox is to show that the premises of the argument must be incorrect since the conclusion is so obviously impossible. This is a variant of the *reductio ad absurdum*. Any paradox therefore presents us with a choice:

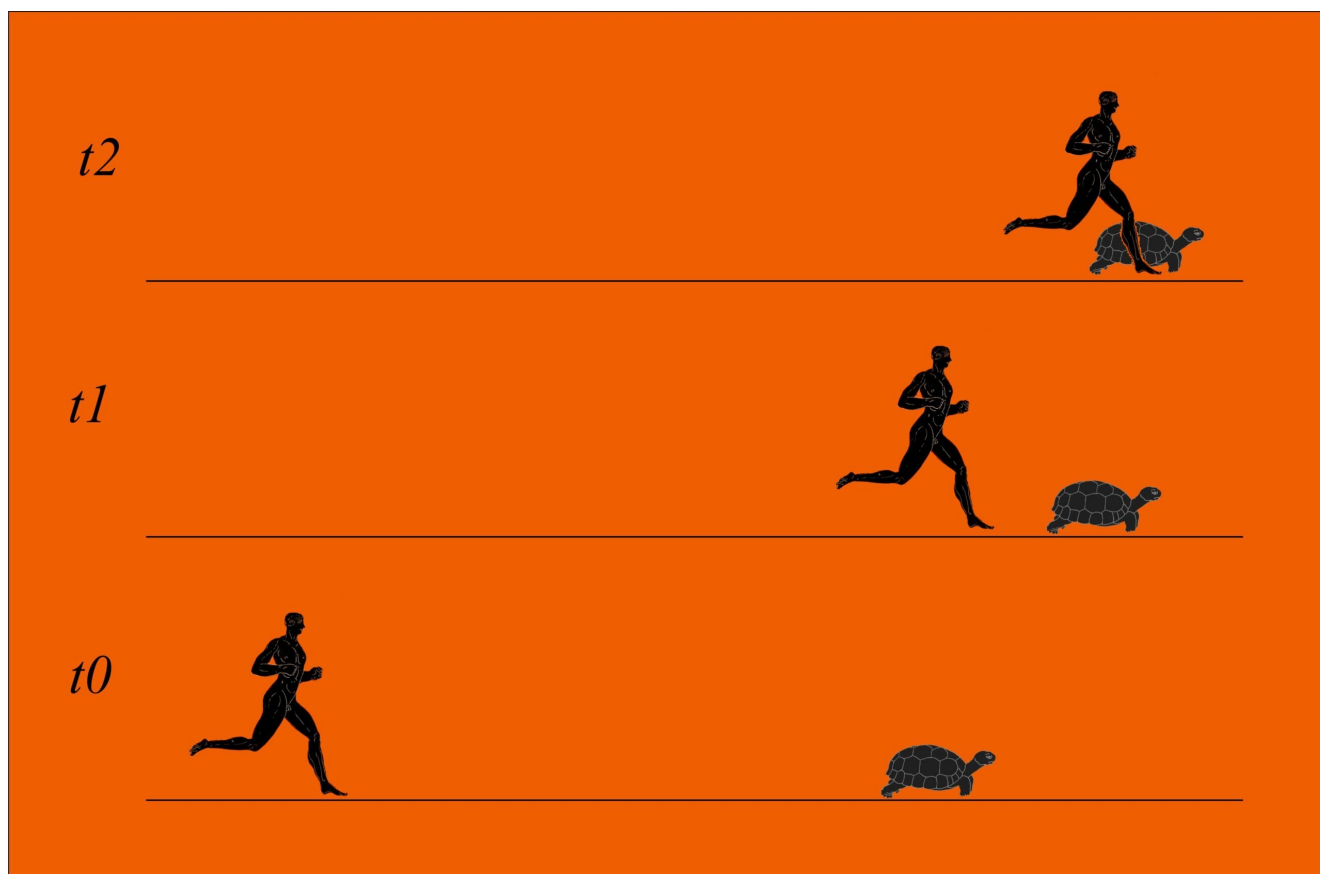
either the conclusion is not really unacceptable, or else the starting point, or the reasoning, has some non-obvious flaw. (Sainsbury, 2009, p 3)

One problem with Zeno's paradoxes is that we do not know how to interpret them because we do not know how he intended them to be used. The following paragraphs will consider the two most famous of Zeno's paradoxes from the point of view of modern science and mathematics.

Achilles and the Tortoise

The original paradox appears to have involved two runners one faster than the other. Their identification with Achilles and the Tortoise occurred later. In a race the speedy Achilles is attempting to pass a slow Tortoise, who has been given a head start. In order to catch up with the tortoise Achilles must first reach the point where the turtle began the race (t_0). However, by then (t_1) the tortoise has already moved ahead, albeit by a smaller distance than Achilles has traversed. Achilles must then reach the point to which the Tortoise had advanced. He can cover this extra distance by t_2

but again the Tortoise has already moved ahead. Achilles continues to reach the point to which the Tortoise has advanced only to find that the Tortoise has already moved further on. Achilles can therefore never pass the Tortoise. The first three episodes of this infinite train are shown below. For ease of illustration, Achilles is made to run about 4 times faster than the Tortoise:



The paradox basically proposes that the time taken by Achilles to catch up with the Tortoise is composed of an infinite number of intervals. Even though the later intervals may become vanishingly small, an infinite number of intervals would take an infinite amount of time. Modern mathematics, however, has shown that infinite series like that of Achilles and the Tortoise can have a finite sum. An infinite geometric series of the form

$$\sum_{n=0}^{\infty} z^n$$

sums to a finite amount $1/(1-z)$ if the absolute value of z is less than 1. For the example that we have been using the value of z is $1/4$, i.e., the ratio of the velocities between Tortoise and Achilles. The sum of the series is thus $4/3$.

This is demonstrated through the following equations. The sum of the series (T) is equal to the time taken to cover the distance of the Tortoise's head start (for simplicity this is made equal to 1) plus the time taken to cover the distance that the Tortoise has covered in the meantime (equal to $1/4$ since for our illustration Achilles travels 4 times faster than the Tortoise) plus $1/16$ for the next abortive catch-up, and so on to infinity (...). The equations demonstrate that the sum of the series equals $4/3$.

$$T = 1 + \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{16} + \frac{1}{64} + \dots$$

$$4T = 4 + 1 + \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{16} + \dots$$

$$4T = 4 + T$$

$$3T = 4$$

$$T = \frac{4}{3}$$

The paradox can also be solved using algebraic equations. One can assume Achilles catches up with the Tortoise at a time T after travelling a distance D . The equation for Achilles is

$$D = T \cdot V_a \quad \text{where } V_a \text{ is the known velocity of Achilles}$$

And for the Tortoise is

$$D = T \cdot V_t + H \quad \text{where } H \text{ is the distance of the head start and } V_t \text{ is the velocity of the Tortoise}$$

Combining the two equations we have

$$T \cdot V_a = T \cdot V_t + H$$

Thence

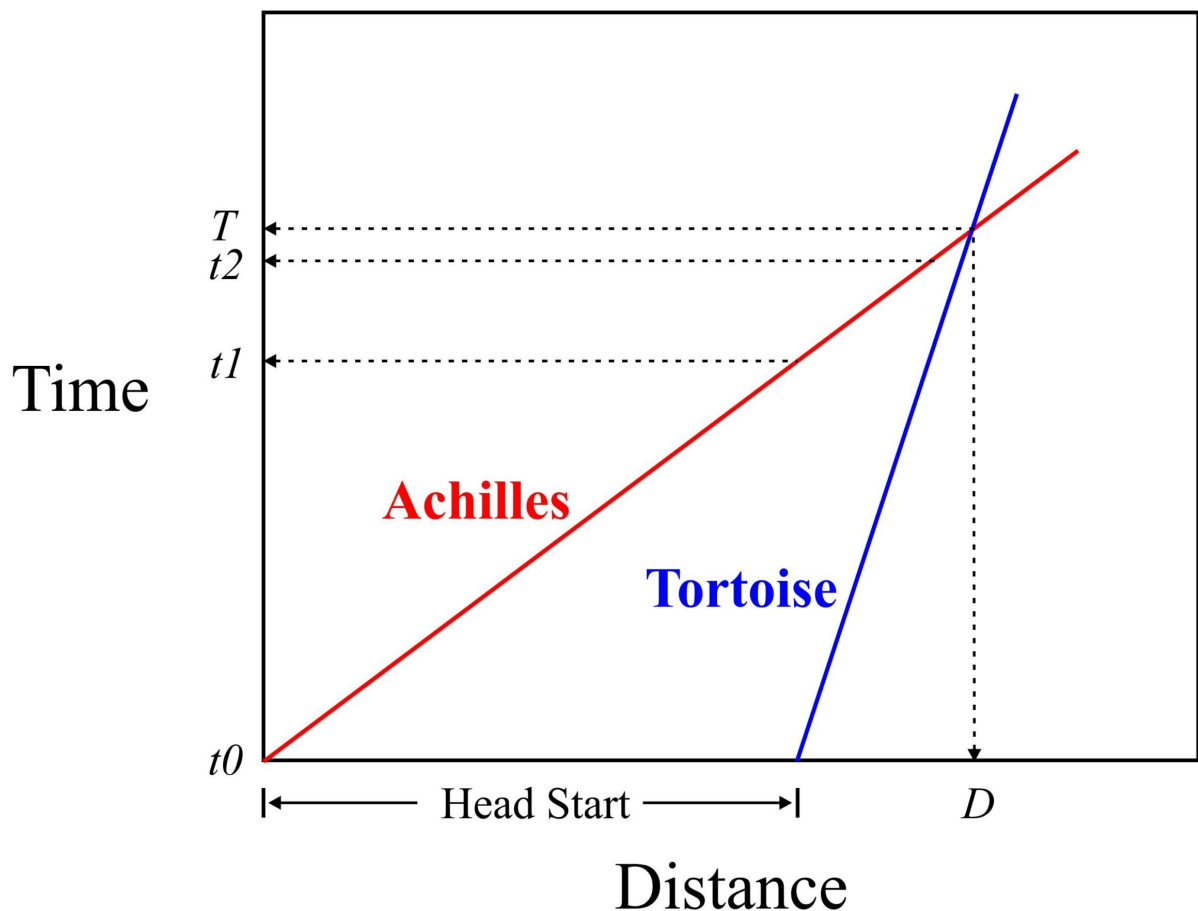
$$T = H / (V_a - V_t)$$

In our example V_t is 1/4 of V_a

$$T = H / (3/4 \cdot V_a)$$

Or 4/3 the time that it takes Achilles to travel the distance of the Tortoise's head start.

These calculations can be represented graphically with distance plotted on the horizontal axis and time on the vertical axis:



A simple mathematical view of Zeno's paradox is to set the frame of reference to the moving Tortoise and to calculate the

speed of Achilles relative to this reference. In our example, the speed of Achilles relative to the Turtle is 3. This is $\frac{3}{4}$ the speed of Achilles relative to the absolute reference and thus it will take Achilles $\frac{4}{3}$ the time to catch up with the Tortoise.

These mathematical approaches allow us to understand the movements of Achilles and the Tortoise, to determine where they will be as time passes, and to calculate when Achilles will finally pass the Tortoise. However, they do not really resolve the paradox as presented by Zeno. If space and time are infinitely divisible into points and instants, it will take Achilles an infinite number of acts to catch up with the Tortoise, and an infinite number of acts will take forever (Black, 1970).

We do not know Zeno's original intent in formulating his paradoxes of motion. He probably did not wish to prove that motion is impossible, and that our perception of moving things is illusory. Rather, he likely wanted to prove that space and time are continuous and cannot be divided into discrete points and instants. This would be in keeping with the monism of his teacher Parmenides. Bertrand Russell (1926, p 174) stated that

The conclusion that Zeno wishes us to draw is that plurality is a delusion and that spaces and times are really indivisible.

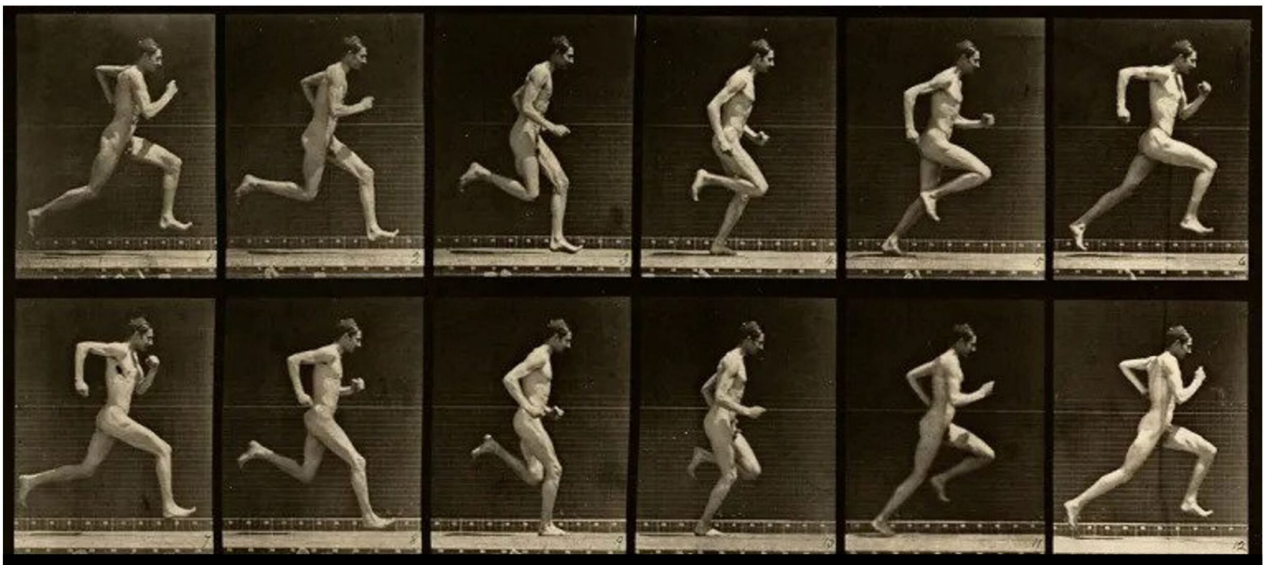
However, Russell goes on to propose that space and time may be infinitely divisible if we properly understand infinity.

Zeno's Arrow

At any instant of time a flying arrow will occupy a space equal to its own size and therefore show no evidence of movement. Its flight is therefore a succession of rests. While it is moving, the arrow is always stationary.

Zeno had not observed an arrow at an instant of time: he could

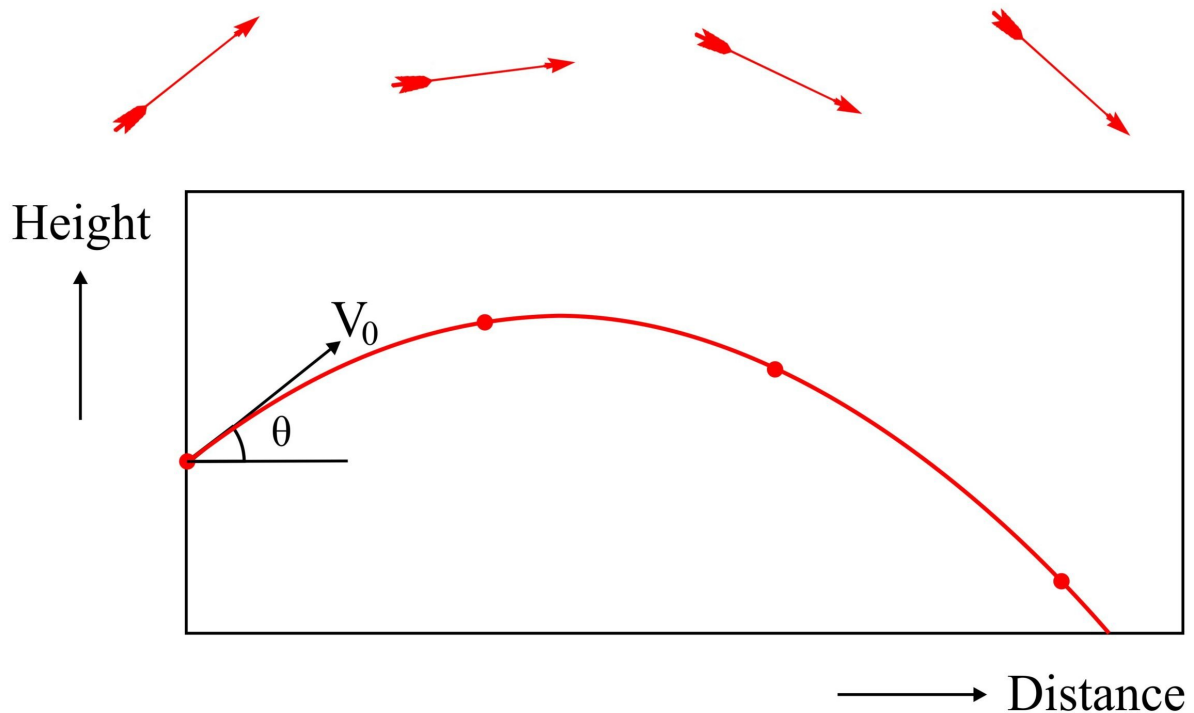
only imagine it. Modern high-speed photography can record moving objects at an instant of time. If the exposure time is very small, they appear unblurred, or completely stationary. The observer cannot tell that the object is moving from its instantaneous appearance. The first person to record motion using high-speed photography was Eadweard Muybridge (1840-1904). The following set of photographs of a running man were likely taken in the 1870s and printed in 1887.



The development of the stroboscope which could present brief flashes of bright light allowed photographers such as Harold Edgerton (1903-1990), also known as "Papa Flash," to examine very rapidly moving objects. The following photograph from the 1950s shows a moving bullet "caught" at two instants by two stroboscopic flashes separated by only a brief time (probably of the order of 50 microseconds).



At first glance, modern science apparently confirms the conclusion Zeno's *Arrow Paradox*: at any instant of time a moving arrow, man or bullet is stationary. However, just because something looks stationary does not mean that it does not have velocity. The trajectory of the arrow can be represented by two functions denoting its horizontal (x) and vertical (y) position:



The parabolic trajectory is determined by the initial velocity

(V_0) of the arrow as it is released from the bow, the angle (θ) at which it is released, its initial height above the ground (y_0), and downward acceleration caused by gravity (g). The following diagram shows a sample trajectory, together with views of the arrow at four instants of time. Note that the formulae do not consider the (very small) effects of friction and treat the horizontal velocity of the arrow as constant. The horizontal axis can therefore also represent time.

$$x_t = x_0 + v_0 t \cos(\theta)$$

$$y_t = y_0 + v_0 t \sin(\theta) - \frac{1}{2}gt^2$$

The invention of the calculus by Newton and Leibniz allowed us to calculate the velocity of a moving object at any instant in time. If the distance travelled can be represented by a function (f), the velocity at any instant (t) can be calculated by seeing how far the object travels in a tiny period of time (Δt)

$$\lim_{\Delta t \rightarrow 0} \frac{f(t + \Delta t) - f(t)}{\Delta t}$$

The limit as Δt approaches zero – the derivative of the function – is the object's instantaneous velocity. At any instant of time the object shows no evidence of movement, but it still has velocity. Though it appears stationary, it still moves.

The calculus allows us to calculate the velocity of the arrow at any instant (Reeder 2015). However, Zeno's paradox calls into question the idea of discrete instants in time. Motion is continuous; it is not a succession of stationary positions. William James (1910, p. 157):

Zeno's arguments were meant to show, not that motion could not really take place, but that it could not truly be conceived as

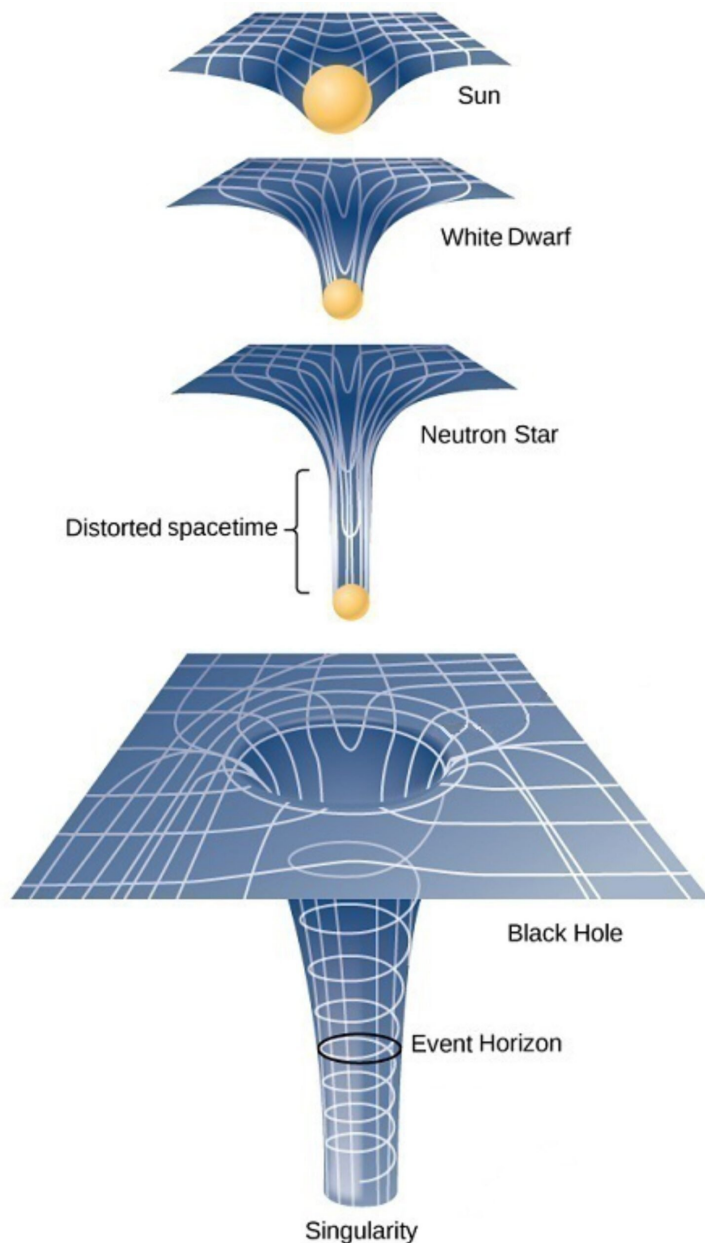
taking place by the successive occupancy of points. If a flying arrow occupies at each point of time a determinate point of space, its motion becomes nothing but a sum of rests, for it exists not, out of any point; and in the point it doesn't move. Motion cannot truly occur as thus discretely constituted.

Time and Space

Zeno's paradoxes have been discussed extensively (Dowden, 2013; Grünbaum, 1967; Huggett, 2018; McLaughlin, 1994; Sainsbury, 2009; Salmon, 1970; Strobach, 2013). Most writers suggest that modern mathematics can handle the paradoxes: infinite series may sum to a finite amount and instantaneous velocities can be assessed with the infinitesimal calculus.

However, the nature of time and space remain imperfectly understood. A particular problem involves what might be considered the smoothness of these dimensions. Achilles does not run through an infinite set of decreasing distances to catch up with the Tortoise. Rather he runs smoothly and quickly passes the Tortoise. The arrow does not move from one stationary position to the next as if it were in a movie flickering at a slow frame-rate. The arrow moves smoothly from the bow to the target.

Modern conceptions of space and time propose that they are not absolute (e.g., Rovelli, 2018; Markosian et al., 2018). The fabric of space and time can be altered by gravity. A large mass like our sun will distort the adjacent space. Light travelling near such a mass will be deflected by the resultant curvature. A large mass also alters time, which passes more rapidly the closer one is to the mass. It is difficult to understand how such elastic dimensions can be represented by discrete points. The effects of gravity are illustrated in the following diagram, where the four-dimensional fabric of space is shown as a 2-dimensional mesh:



Time's Arrow

Although we often consider our universe as existing in four dimensions, the dimension of time is distinct from the three spatial dimensions. Though we can move back and forth in space, we can only move forward in time.

Studies of statistical mechanics demonstrated that the state of a system can be described by the organization of its components. With the passage of time, this state can only change towards increasing disorder. In the formulation of Rudolf Clausius (1822-1888) of this disorder was called "entropy" (Greek *en*, in + *trope*, change). Ludwig Boltzmann

(1844-1906) considered entropy in terms of statistical mechanics. He described entropy (S) in terms of the number (Ω) of possible microstates (organizations of its molecular components) that could result in a system's macrostate (temperature, pressure, volume, density, etc.). His formulation of entropy, and of the second law of thermodynamics (with the passage of time entropy can only increase) are:

$$S = k_B \ln \Omega$$

$$\Delta S \geq 0$$

where \ln is the natural logarithm and k_B is Boltzmann's constant.

The concept of entropy led Arthur Eddington to propose the idea of "Time's Arrow:"

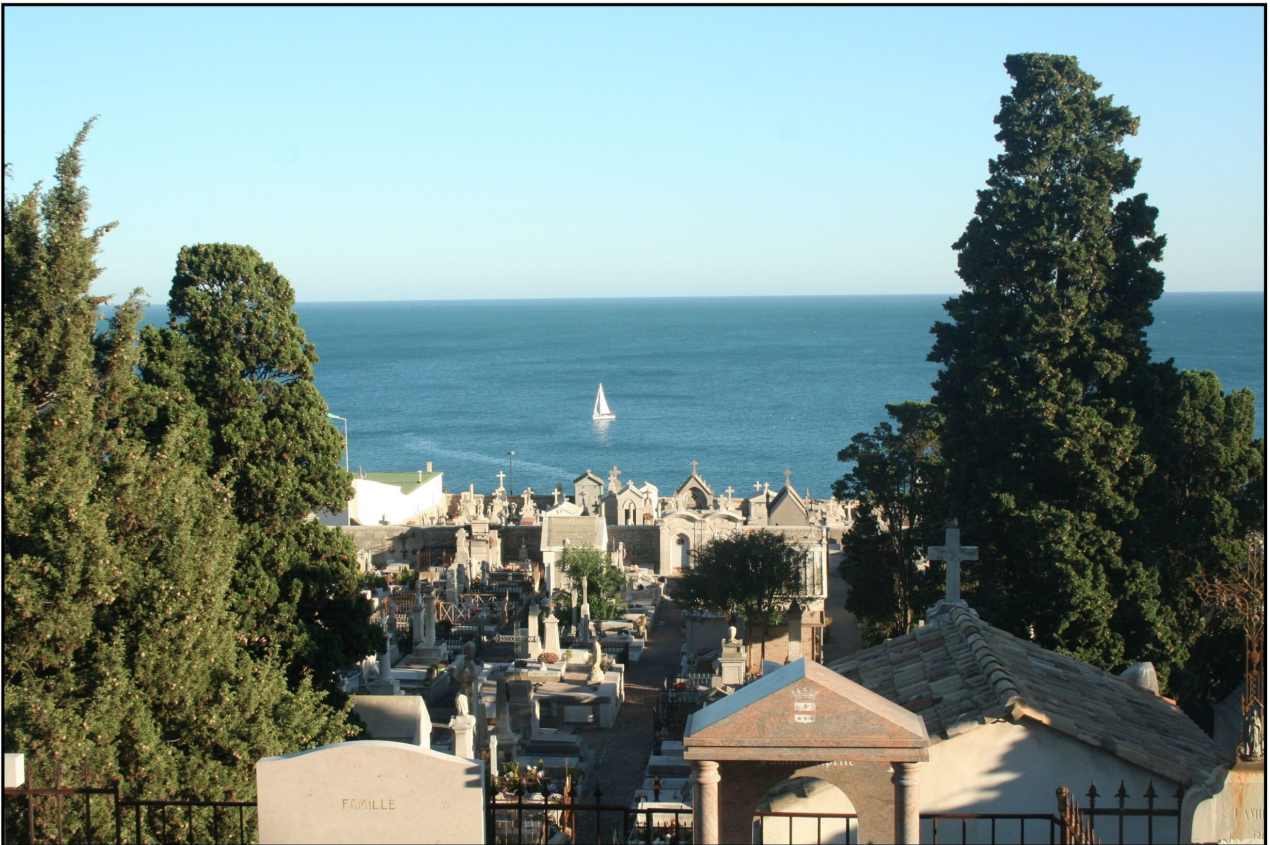
Let us draw an arrow arbitrarily. If as we follow the arrow we find more and more of the random element in the state of the world, then the arrow is pointing towards the future; if the random element decreases the arrow points towards the past. That is the only distinction known to physics. This follows at once if our fundamental contention is admitted that the introduction of randomness is the only thing which cannot be undone. I shall use the phrase "time's arrow" to express this one-way property of time which has no analogue in space. (Eddington, 1927, p 67.)

Unlike Zeno's Arrow which is concerned with the nature of motion in time, Eddington's arrow is concerned with the nature of time itself.

The Graveyard by the Sea

In 1922, Paul Valéry wrote a long poem *Le Cimetière Marin* about time and mortality. Its setting is a cemetery

overlooking the Mediterranean Sea at Sète in Southern France:



At the poem's climax, Valéry calls on Zeno.:

Zénon! Cruel Zénon! Zénon d'Élée!
M'as-tu percé de cette flèche ailée
Qui vibre, vole, et qui ne vole pas!
Le son m'enfante et la flèche me tue!
Ah! le soleil . . . Quelle ombre de tortue
Pour l'âme, Achille immobile à grands pas!

;Zeno, Zeno, cruel philosopher Zeno,
Have you then pierced me with your feathered arrow
That hums and flies, yet does not fly! The sounding
Shaft gives me life, the arrow kills. Oh, sun! –
Oh, what a tortoise-shadow to outrun
My soul, Achilles' giant stride left standing!
(translation by C. Day-Lewis, 1950)

Zeno, Zeno, the cruel, Elean Zeno!
You've truly fixed me with that feathered arrow

Which quivers as it flies and never moves!
The sound begets me and the arrow kills!
Ah, sun! . . . What a tortoise shadow for the soul,
Achilles motionless in his giant stride!
(translation of David Paul, 1971)

(I have included two translations, one by Day-Lewis which maintains the rhyme scheme and a more literal version by Paul.)

Valéry's imagery is complex, it melds Time's Arrow with Zeno's paradoxes of the Arrow and of Achilles and the Tortoise. Time will proceed to death and disorder before we can ever attain eternity.

Valéry does not leave us stumbling unsuccessfully after the Tortoise. His poem ends with an invocation to live completely in the life we have no matter that it leads to death.

Le vent se lève! . . . Il faut tenter de vivre!
L'air immense ouvre et referme mon livre,
La vague en poudre ose jaillir des rocs!
Envolez-vous, pages tout éblouies!
Rompez, vagues! Rompez d'eaux réjouies
Ce toit tranquille où picoraient des focs!

The wind is rising! . . . We must try to live!
The huge air opens and shuts my book: the wave
Dares to explode out of the rocks in reeking
Spray. Fly away, my sun-bewildered pages!
Break, waves! Break up with your rejoicing surges
This quiet roof where sails like doves were
pecking.
(Day-Lewis)

The wind is rising! . . . We must try to live!
The immense air opens and shuts my book,

A wave dares burst in powder over the rocks.
Pages, whirl away in a dazzling riot!
And break, waves, rejoicing, break that quiet
Roof where foraging sails dipped their beaks!
(Paul)

The last line of the poem alludes to its opening where Valéry likened the boats sailing on the sea to doves moving on an immense roof. That quiet roof – the sea – represents the eternity that we live not long enough to understand.

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Gauguin

Gauguin

In 1891, Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) left his wife and five children and sailed for Tahiti, where he hoped

to immerse myself in virgin nature, to see no one but savages, live their life, with no other thought in mind but to render, the way a child would, the concepts formed in my brain and to do this with the aid of nothing but the primitive means of art, the only means that are good and true (letter quoted in Eisenman, 1997, p 77).

His decision to desert his family and follow his art has been considered by philosophers as a case study in ethics. Was his hope of artistic success adequate justification for his behavior? As luck would have it, Gauguin did become a famous artist, albeit posthumously. Can this retrospectively vindicate his flight to Tahiti? These issues are complex – both in the abstract and in terms of Gauguin's actual life.

Life Before Art

Gauguin was born in France but spent much of his childhood in Peru, where his mother's family had aristocratic connections. His grandmother Flora Tristan (1803-1844), a feminist and socialist, was the niece of Juan Pío Camilo de Tristán y Moscoso, who briefly served as president of South Peru.

Gauguin returned to France to finish his schooling and then spent three years as a merchant sailor and two years in the French Navy, during which time he travelled throughout the world. When he returned to France in 1871, Gauguin was taken in by a rich relative, Gustave Arosa, an avid collector of realist and impressionist paintings. Arosa got Gauguin a job on the stock exchange, and introduced him to Camille Pissarro.

Gauguin became a very successful broker, and took up painting as a hobby. He married a young Danish woman Mette-Sophie Gad (1850–1920), and had five children. Having made a fortune on the stock market, Gauguin became an art collector himself, buying paintings by Pissarro, Cézanne, Manet, Degas, and Sisley (Bretell & Fonsmark, 2005, p 56)

Impressionism

Gauguin had talent and he quickly learned the new Impressionist style. His paintings were included in the Impressionist Exhibitions beginning with the fifth in 1880. Below is one of his paintings from this time – *Vaugirard Market Gardens*, 1879 – together with a self-portrait from 1885.



The Stock Market Crash

In 1882 the Union Générale bank collapsed and the Paris Bourse crashed. By 1883 Gauguin was out of work. The family moved to Rouen where life was less expensive than in Paris. Gauguin decided to paint full time. However, he was not able to sell his paintings. Mette moved back to Denmark with most of the family in 1884, and Gauguin reluctantly followed in 1885. For a brief time, he was a salesman for French tarpaulins in Copenhagen, but he did not speak Danish and the endeavor came to nought. Mette supported the family by giving French lessons. Gauguin's paintings found no market among the Danes. He became depressed, and sometimes was sometimes physically violent with his wife (Mathews, 2001, p 62). Mette's family insisted that he leave.

In 1885 Gauguin returned alone to Paris. He submitted nineteen paintings to the Eighth and Final Exhibition of the Impressionist in 1886, but these were not well received by

either critics or buyers. Gauguin fled Paris for Pont-Aven in Brittany, an artists' colony where living was cheap. There he worked with Emile Bernard and Louis Anquetin.

Vision after the Sermon (1888)

Gauguin was fascinated by the deep religiosity of the Breton peasants. He developed a new style of painting to portray their lives. He began using clearly outlined blocks of flat color in the manner of the Japanese prints that had become popular in Paris. He further decided that colors should be based as much upon the imagination as upon reality. This emphasis on the creative imagination derived from the Symbolist movement in literature. Gauguin named his new style of painting "Synthetism." This approach was also called "Cloisonnism" after the technique for decorating metalwork, whereby colored enamels are placed within spaces bordered by metal strips. A masterpiece of this approach was Gauguin's *The Vision after the Sermon*, which portrays Breton peasants experiencing a vision of Jacob wrestling with the angel after a sermon on this episode from Genesis 22: 22-32 (Herban, 1977):



The figure at the lower right is Gauguin. The young peasant at the lower left is likely a portrait of Bernard's sister Madeleine, with whom Gauguin was infatuated. The following is a description of the painting from Vargas Llosa's novel *The Way to Paradise*. Vargas Llosa used the second person narrative as though someone is talking to Gauguin (or Gauguin is talking to himself). "Koké" was the name that the Tahitians called him – their best approximation of his name:

The true miracle of the painting wasn't the apparition of biblical characters in real life, Paul, or in the minds of those humble peasants. It was the insolent colors, daringly antinaturalist: the vermillion of the earth, the bottle green of Jacob's clothing, the ultramarine blue of the angel, the Prussian black of the women's garments and the pink-, green- and blue-tinted white of the great row of caps

and collars interposed between the spectator, the apple tree, and the grappling pair. What was miraculous was the weightlessness reigning at the center of the painting, the space in which the tree, the cow, and the fervent women seemed to levitate under the spell of their faith. The miracle was that you had managed to vanquish prosaic realism by creating a new reality on the canvas, where the objective and the subjective, the real and the supernatural, were mingled, indivisible. Well done, Paul! Your first masterpiece, Koké! (Vargas Llosa, 2003, pp 217-218)

Gauguin also created a striking version of the crucifixion based on his time in Pont-Aven – *The Yellow Christ* (1889):



The Studio of the South

Back in Paris, Gauguin met the dealer Theo van Gogh and through him his brother Vincent. The two artists exchanged self-portraits. Van Gogh's saw himself as an austere Japanese monk; Gauguin's portrait is off-center against a floral wallpaper background includes a portrait of Emile Bernard:



Vincent invited Gauguin to stay with him in Arles in Provence. For nine weeks in late 1888 the two artists lived and worked together (Silverman, 2000; Druick et al, 2001). Although their relations were initially amicable, they disagreed on many things and the tension between them increased. If we are to believe what Gauguin later recalled in his journals (Gauguin, 2009, pp 12-14), one evening van Gogh threatened Gauguin with a razor and Gauguin decamped to stay the night in a hotel. Van Gogh then proceeded to cut off his right ear with the razor and presented the ear to one of the prostitutes in Arles. Gauguin fled to Paris and van Gogh was confined to an asylum.

Manao Tupapau

Van Gogh and Gauguin had discussed the book *Rarahu* by Pierre Loti (1880), which described the author's marriage to a Tahitian girl, and the two artists considered the possibility of painting in the islands of the Pacific. Van Gogh committed suicide in 1890. Gauguin sailed to Tahiti in 1891.

In Tahiti Gauguin took a Tahitian girl aged thirteen, Tehemana (Tehura), as his mistress. One night when returning home late to his hut, he found her lying frightened on the bed:

Quickly, I struck a match, and I saw. . . . Tehura, immobile, naked, lying face downward flat on the bed with the eyes inordinately large with fear. She looked at me, and seemed not to recognize me. As for myself I stood for some moments strangely uncertain. A contagion emanated from the terror of Tehura. I had the illusion that a phosphorescent light was streaming from her staring eyes. Never had I seen her so beautiful, so tremulously beautiful. And then in this half-light which was surely peopled for her with dangerous apparitions and terrifying suggestions, I was afraid to make any movement which might increase the child's paroxysm of fright. How could I know what at that moment I might seem to her? Might she not with my frightened face take me for one of the demons and specters, one of the Tupapaus, with which the legends of her race people sleepless nights? Did I really know who in truth she was herself? The intensity of fright which had dominated her as the result of the physical and moral power of her superstitions had transformed her into a strange being, entirely different from anything I had known heretofore. (Gauguin, 1919/85, pp 33-34)

In Tahitian legends the Tupapaus were malignant demons. Over the next few days Gauguin painted the scene that he had witnessed, calling it *Manao Tupapau*, "Spirit of the Dead Watching" (1892):



Vargas Llosa imagines his thoughts about the painting:

Yes, this was truly the painting of a savage. He regarded it with satisfaction when it seemed to him that it was finished. In him, as in the savage mind, the everyday and the fantastic were united in a single reality, somber, forbidding, infused with religiosity and desire, life and death. The lower half of the painting was objective, realist; the upper half subjective and unreal but no less authentic. The naked girl would be obscene without the fear in her eyes and the incipient downturn of her mouth. But fear didn't diminish her beauty. It augmented it, tightening her buttocks in such an insinuating way, making them an altar of human flesh on which to celebrate a barbaric ceremony, in homage to a cruel and pagan god. And in the upper part of the canvas was the ghost, which was really

more yours than Tahitian, Koké. It bore no resemblance to those demons with claws and dragon teeth that Moerenhout described. It was an old woman in a hooded cloak, like the crones of Brittany forever fixed in your memory, time-less women who, when you lived in Pont-Aven or Le Pouldu, you would meet on the streets of Finistère. They seemed half dead already, ghosts in life. If a statistical analysis were deemed necessary, the items belonging to the objective world were these: the mattress, jet-black like the girl's hair; the yellow flowers; the greenish sheets of pounded bark; the pale green cushion; and the pink cushion, whose tint seemed to have been transferred to the girl's upper lip. This order of reality was counterbalanced by the painting's upper half: there the floating flowers were sparks, gleams, featherlight phosphorescent meteors aloft in a bluish mauve sky in which the colored brushstrokes suggested a cascade of pointed leaves. The ghost, in profile and very quiet, leaned against a cylindrical post, a totem of delicately colored abstract forms, reddish and glassy blue in tone. This upper half was a mutable, shifting, elusive substance, seeming as if it might evaporate at any minute. From up close, the ghost had a straight nose, swollen lips, and the large fixed eye of a parrot. You had managed to give the whole a flawless harmony, Koké. Funereal music emanated from it, and light shone from the greenish-yellow of the sheet and the orange-tinted yellow of the flowers. (Vargas Llosa, 2003, pp 22-23)

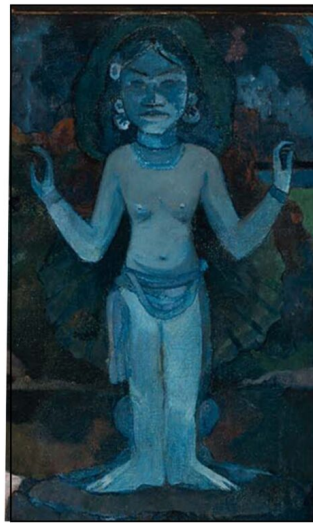
The painting is one of the most discussed of Gauguin's Tahitian pictures. The commentary is ambivalent:

All this is to put the painting in the best possible light. But there is surely more to it than just a charming anecdote based on local folklore. In blunt terms what we actually see is the interior of a hut at night, with a large couch, covered in a boldly flowered cloth, partially overlaid by a plain white sheet on which lies a naked girl, face down, another of the child-like, yet distinctly erotic figures who

have appeared before in Gauguin's work – pert buttocks offered invitingly to the spectator. There is even something disturbing about the way the face is half-turned towards the viewer, or rather towards the artist, Gauguin, as if he and not the figure in the background is the spirit of which she is afraid. (Sweetman, 1995, pp 326-327).

Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?

In 1893 Gauguin returned to Paris and arranged to sell some of his Tahitian paintings. He was not happy in Paris and in 1895 he returned to Tahiti. Over the next few years, Gauguin became severely depressed. He had suffered a broken ankle in a brawl in Concarneau near Pont Aven and the fracture had never really healed. He drank excessively – partly to relieve the pain and partly to improve his mood. He had sores on his legs, perhaps related to syphilis or perhaps related to the malnutrition that accompanies alcoholism. In 1897 he attempted to commit suicide with arsenic but failed. After this he worked on his last great painting, *D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?* (1898):



Gauguin described his work in a letter to Daniel de Monfried:

The canvas is 4.50 meters long and 1.70 meters high. The two upper corners are chrome yellow, with the inscription on the

left and my signature on the right, as if it were a fresco, painted on a gold-colored wall whose corners had worn away. In the bottom right, a sleeping baby, then three seated women. Two figures dressed in purple confide their thoughts to one another; another figure, seated, and deliberately outsized despite the perspective, raises one arm in the air and looks with astonishment at these two people who dare to think of their destiny. A figure in the middle picks fruit. Two cats near a child. A white she-goat. The idol, both its arms mysteriously and rhythmically uplifted, seems to point to the next world. The seated figure leaning on her right hand seems to be listening to the idol; and finally an old woman close to death seems to accept, to be resigned [to her fate]; . . . at her feet, a strange white bird holding a lizard in its claw represents the futility of vain words. All this takes place by the edge of a stream in the woods. In the background, the sea, then the mountains of the neighboring island. Although there are different shades of color, the landscape constantly has a blue and Veronese green hue from one end to the other. All of the nude figures stand out from it in a bold orangey tone. If the Beaux-Arts pupils competing for the Prix de Rome were told: "The painting you have to do will be on the theme, 'Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?' " what would they do? I have finished a philosophical treatise comparing that theme with the Gospel. I think it is good. (Gauguin, 1990, p. 160; original letter is illustrated in Shackelford & Frèches-Thory, 2004, p 168)

The philosophical treatise he mentioned was likely *The Catholic Church and Modern Times* (Gauguin, 1990, pp 161-173), in which Gauguin decries the hypocrisy of the modern church and urges his readers to return to a more natural theology. His painting is a testament to these ideas.

In a letter to Charles Morrice (Goddard, 2029, p 48) Gauguin describes his painting as proceeding from right to left, with

the answer to "Where do we come from?" on the right, the answer to "What are we?" in the center and the answer to "Where are we going?" on the left. Nevertheless, the painting has no simple interpretation (Shackelford & Frèches-Thory, 2004, pp 167-201). The man plucking fruit from a tree in the center perhaps refers to Adam in a modern version of Eden. The two women in purple may refer to the church and its interpretation of our origins. The idol on the left is the Tahitian Goddess Hina (Gauguin, 1953, pp 11-13). Hina represented the sky, moon, air, and spirit. From the union between Hina and Tefatou, God of matter and earth, came forth man. Hina wished that man might be reborn after death much like the moon returns each month. Tefatou insisted that, although that matter lasts forever, man must die.

The painting stands at the cusp between earlier paintings like that of the neo-classical *Between Art and Nature* (1895) of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, which Gauguin has seen on his visit back to Paris, and the Fauvist *La Bonheur de Vivre* (1905) of Henri Matisse. Both paintings are smaller than Gauguin's masterpiece.



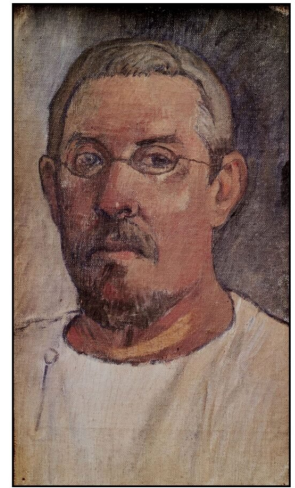
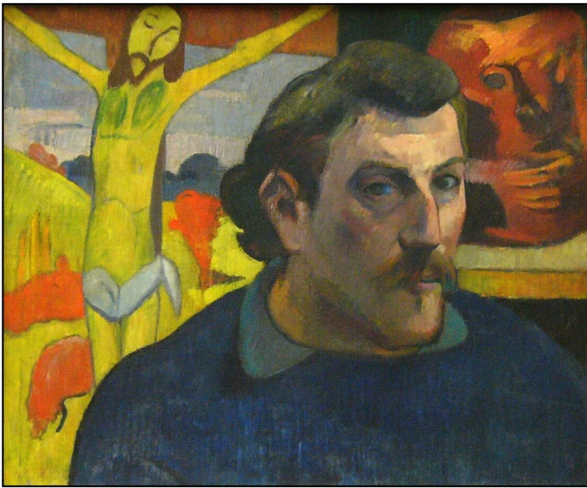
La Maison de Jouir

Gauguin decided that Tahiti was too tainted with Western civilization and decided in 1901 to move to the Marquesa Islands, about 1500 km northeast of Tahiti. There he again took a young Polynesian girl for his mistress and built himself a home that he called *La Maison de Jouir*. This is

usually translated as the “House of Pleasure” but more precisely means the “House of Orgasm.” He continued to paint and to write, and he created many striking woodcuts and drawings. One of his paintings from 1902 was the *Riders on the Beach*. The pink color of the beach is in the imagination of the artist and nowhere near reality.



In these last years, Gauguin was wracked by pain and became more and more depressed. His last *Self Portrait* (1903) from just before his death shows the ravages of alcohol and morphine. It is presented below together with two earlier portraits, one from 1889 alluding to his time in Pont-Aven, and one from 1893 referring to his first visit to Tahiti:



Acclaim

Gauguin was never recognized in his lifetime as a painter of significance. His death in 1903 warranted only a few lines in the Paris newspapers. It was not until 1906 that his friends arranged a retrospective exhibition at the Salon d'Automne in Paris. His fame has grown since then. Art historians now consider Cézanne, van Gogh and Gauguin as the “guiding lights” (Hook, 2021, p. 21) of the modernist revolution in art that occurred in the first decades of the 20th Century. This assessment is borne out by the high prices that Gauguin’s paintings now command at auction.

Isabelle Cahn (in Shackelford & Frèches-Thory, 2004, pp 300-1) writes

He was the one who had dared take all the liberties, sparking the most advanced research, particularly in the domain of color . . . Gauguin had perceived the decline of the West and revolted against the dictatorship of Greco-Roman culture. In his wake, other artists had tried to surpass the traditional boundaries of thought and, seeking regeneration, had taken an interest in primitive arts, children’s drawings, folk art and outsider art. An interest in the unconscious had also opened new vistas. By giving shape to his internal world, Gauguin exposed the anxiety of

the modern soul and its questions about its fate, leading us to edge of our own enigma, but not weighing it down with explanations.

Bretell (1988, p 396) remarks about the effects of Gauguin's work on later painters:

Picasso was clearly devastated by the power and raw, crude strength of the printed drawings. Matisse was overcome by the color and the apparently casual draftsmanship of the late paintings. Indeed, if one can measure the strength of an artist by that of his most brilliant followers, Gauguin would be among the very greatest from the late nineteenth century.

Moral Luck

In 1976 Bernard Williams presented a paper on "Moral Luck," in which he dealt extensively with the

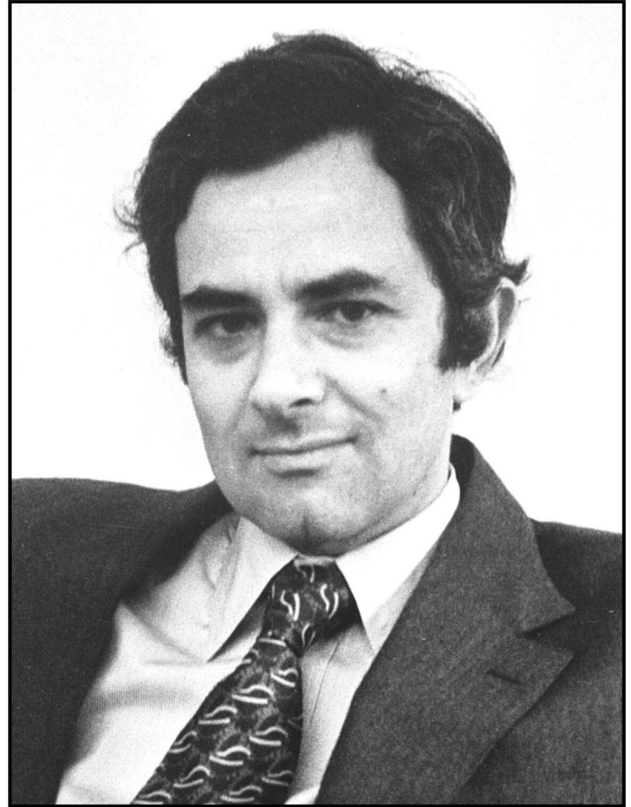
example of the creative artist who turns away from the definite and pressing human claims on him in order to live a life in which, as he supposes, he can pursue his art.

For simplicity he calls the artist Gauguin, but he considers the case abstractly without being limited by historical facts. The main issue is that when Gauguin decided to desert his family, the only justification for his action was his hope that he would fulfil his destiny (and become a great artist), and that his art would contribute significantly to human culture. The concept of moral luck is that we cannot predict the future with any certainty. Gauguin may have died in a shipwreck before he reached Tahiti. In this event, his actions would have no justification. As chance (or "luck") would have it, Gauguin did live to paint his greatest works in Tahiti, and did contribute significantly to the history of modern art. The problem is whether such an outcome can retrospectively justify the desertion of his family. Certainly not from the point of view of his family; probably not from the point of

view of those with little interest in modern art. A secondary issue is whether aesthetic values can be used as justification for behavior that is, in itself, unethical.

Thomas Nagel commented on Williams's ideas and discussed moral luck in a more general way. Both authors thereafter updated their papers (Nagel, 1979; Williams, 1981), and there has been much further discussion in the literature (e.g., Lang, 2019; Nelkin 2019). Nagel described moral luck as that which occurs between the intention to act and the outcome of the intended action. Though we might profess, like Kant, that moral guilt or acclaim depends upon the intension (or "will") rather than the outcome, in actuality, the outcome largely determines our sense of an action's moral worth. For example, a person who drives while impaired and winds up killing a pedestrian is considered much more blameworthy than one who was similarly impaired but, as luck would have it, did not kill anyone. Moral luck points to the issue that we do not completely control the outcomes of our actions.

The following illustrations shows Williams on the left and Nagel on the right.



The Crimes of a Colonist

At the time of Gauguin's sojourn, Tahiti and the Marquesas were French colonies. The administrators of the colonies exploited the native Polynesians; the church taught them that their own culture was worthless and that they must convert to Christianity; whatever was worthwhile in their life was appropriated and made part of European culture. It was impossible for Gauguin not to be part of this process – he was a European and French Polynesia was a colony. However, he did not act in the same way as most of the Europeans. He lived with the natives, and tried to understand their language and their ideas. He was aware of the problems:

Circumstances exposed him to the effects of recent colonization; he saw the depredation and the irrecoverable loss first-hand. He also spoke out about colonization – and thereby earned the animus of the colonial and church authorities who hounded him until the end of his life (Maleuvre, 2018).

Gauguin called the Polynesians “savages.” However, for him this was a term of praise rather than contempt. As quoted in the opening paragraph of this post, Gauguin aspired to become a savage.

Sex Tourist

Gauguin’s mistresses in Tahiti and in the Marquesas were young girls of 13 or 14 years. Although it was normal at that time for Polynesian girls of that age to have sexual relations with men, it is impossible not to deplore Gauguin’s taking advantage of them for his own sexual pleasure. Reading about these girls in his book *Noa Noa* (“Fragrance”) is terribly disconcerting:

Indeed, it is soon clear that he is not just the average Westerner exploring for the sake of broadening his understanding of the world—he is, more than anything, a sexual tourist. Even the title *Noa Noa*, which means “fragrance,” is used by Gauguin to indicate the aroma of a human body particularly in sexual situations. Although sexual liaisons similar to those described by Gauguin were regularly reported in other contemporary travel accounts, Gauguin makes them central to the story and, in doing so, transforms the normally pedestrian Tahitian sojourn into an erotic holiday. (Mathews, 2001, p 178).

Most historians believe that the sores on Gauguin’s legs and the heart problems that led to his death were caused by advanced syphilis. However, since the discovery of the causative agent (*Treponema pallidum*) and the definitive Wassermann test did not occur until after his death, we cannot be sure. A recent examination of Gauguin’s teeth did not show evidence that he had taken the mercurial compounds that normally were used to treat the disease at that time (Mueller & Turner, 2018). Nevertheless, the prevalence of syphilis then was high – about 10% in urban populations and likely much more in those who frequented prostitutes. If Gauguin did have

syphilis, he almost certainly gave the disease to his young mistresses.

The following is from a poem Guys like Gauguin (2009) by Selina Tusitala Marsh. Louis Antoine de Bougainville was a French naval captain who explored the Pacific Ocean in the late 18th century:

thanks Bougainville
for desiring 'em young
so guys like Gauguin could dream
and dream
then take his syphilitic body
downstream to the tropics
to test his artistic hypothesis
about how the uncivilised
ripen like pawpaw
are best slightly raw
delectably firm
dangling like golden prepubescent buds
seeding nymphomania
for guys like Gauguin

The Artist as Monster

Gauguin as a person was not easy to like. He was concerned only with his own presumed genius. He treated his family and his mistresses egregiously. Does this mean that we should not consider his paintings – that he should be, in our modern idiom, “cancelled” (e.g., Nayeri, 2019)? Many artists have done monstrous things (Dederer, 2003), and it is often difficult to consider their art independently of their immoral lives. We should not shy away from their sins. We should not call Gauguin’s Polynesian mistresses “young women” but clearly state that they were girls who were seduced by a sexual predator. Nevertheless, we must consider the art for its own sake. Gauguin’s paintings are powerful: they make us experience things differently.

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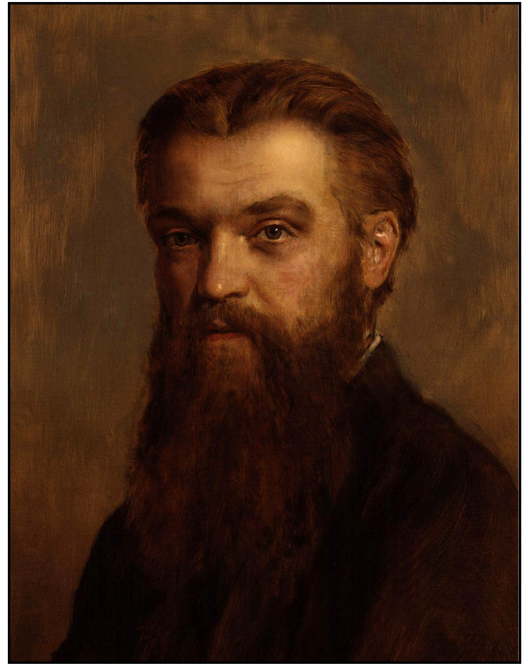
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The Ethics of Belief

In the 19th-Century religious belief came under scientific scrutiny. In 1877, William Kingdon Clifford, an English mathematician and philosopher, proposed that

it is wrong always, everywhere and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.

Without good supporting evidence, one should refrain from believing: it is wrong to take anything on faith. This proposal was disputed by the American philosopher and psychologist William James in an 1896 lecture entitled *The Will to Believe*. James argued that under certain conditions we must form beliefs and act on them, even though the evidence is insufficient. The main requirements were that the believer must choose between two “genuine” possibilities, and that the choice must be sufficiently “momentous” that not choosing would entail significant risk. The latter condition harkens back to the “wager” of Blaise Pascal, wherein a person decides what to believe based on the consequences of these beliefs rather than the evidence for them.



William Kingdon Clifford (1845-79)

William Clifford, a professor of mathematics and mechanics at the University of London, made significant contributions to algebra and to geometry, his ideas in the latter foreshadowing Einstein's *Theory of General Relativity*. He was also interested in the philosophical implications of science, publishing essays on *The Scientific Basis of Morals* and *The Ethics of Belief*.

Clifford begins the latter essay with a story about a shipwreck:

A shipowner was about to send to sea an emigrant-ship. He knew that she was old, and not over-well built at the first; that she had seen many seas and climes, and often had needed repairs. Doubts had been suggested to him that possibly she was not seaworthy. These doubts preyed upon his mind, and made him unhappy; he thought that perhaps he ought to have her thoroughly overhauled and refitted, even though this should put him to great expense. Before the ship sailed, however, he succeeded in overcoming these melancholy reflections. He said to himself that she had gone safely

through so many voyages and weathered so many storms that it was idle to suppose she would not come safely home from this trip also. He would put his trust in Providence, which could hardly fail to protect all these unhappy families that were leaving their fatherland to seek for better times elsewhere. He would dismiss from his mind all ungenerous suspicions about the honesty of builders and contractors. In such ways he acquired a sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe and seaworthy; he watched her departure with a light heart, and benevolent wishes for the success of the exiles in their strange new home that was to be; and he got his insurance-money when she went down in mid-ocean and told no tales.

Clifford insisted that the ship-owner was responsible for the deaths of all who drowned. He may have sincerely believed in the soundness of his ship, but he had no right to so believe on the basis of the evidence before him. Clifford insisted further that had the ship not foundered, its owner was still guilty. From such examples he proposed the principle ("later known as Clifford's principle") that

it is wrong always, everywhere and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.

He expounded:

If a man, holding a belief which he was taught in childhood or persuaded of afterward, keeps down and pushes away any doubts which arise about it in his mind, purposely avoids the reading of books and the company of men that call in question or discuss it, and regards as impious those questions which cannot easily be asked without disturbing it – the life of that man is one long sin against mankind.

Chignell (2018) noted that this approach to belief is similar to that of John Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690)

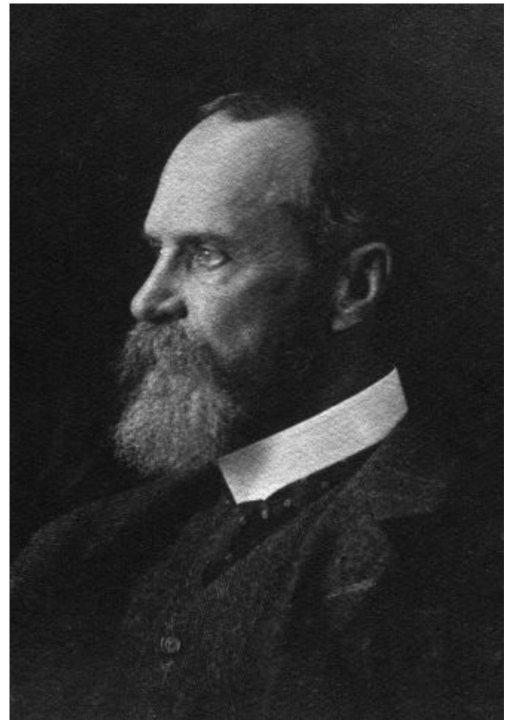
He that believes without having any Reason for believing, may be in love with his own Fancies; but neither seeks Truth as he ought, nor pays the Obedience due to his Maker, who would have him use those discerning Faculties he has given him, to keep him out of Mistake and Error.

Clifford realized that a single person cannot sift through all the evidence for everything she needs to believe. Some beliefs must be based on the *authority* of others. However, the believer should make some rational assessment of that authority. The proposers of the beliefs must be honest; the beliefs must be such that they can be or have been verified by those who have the time and experience to verify them; their acceptance should be independent of any personal profit to those that propose the beliefs.

Clifford also considered the *limits of inference*. Most of what we know is inferred from what we and others have experienced. The fact that the sun has risen daily throughout our lives and throughout all the lives of others leads us to believe that it will continue to do so. Clifford proposed

We may believe what goes beyond our experience, only when it is inferred from that experience by the assumption that what we do not know is like what we know.

In passing Clifford noted that we have no *a priori* right to believe that nature is universally uniform – that the future will always follow the rules of the past. This is itself a belief – one that has worked so far. Some beliefs we need to accept.



William James (1842-1910)

William James trained as a physician but never practised medicine. Rather he pursued his interests in psychology, religion, and philosophy. In each of these fields he published books that have become essential to their respective disciplines: *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), and *Pragmatism* (1907).

In a talk to the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities –later published as *The Will to Believe* (1896) – James proposed that there are situations in which we should believe even when the evidence is insufficient. He describes three necessary conditions. First, the belief should involve a choice between two *live* options, i.e. ones that personally meaningful. Choosing between theosophy or Islam was likely not meaningful to his audience. Second, the choice must be *unavoidable*. Deciding to love or hate someone is easily avoidable – we can just be indifferent. However, accepting or denying the truth of a statement is unavoidable – the

statement must be either true or false. Third and most importantly, the choice must be *momentous*. James used the example of joining Nansen's expedition to the North Pole. To do so could lead to fame and glory; not to do so leaves one with nothing:

He who refuses to embrace a unique opportunity loses the prize as surely as if he tried and failed. Per contra, the option is trivial when the opportunity is not unique, when the stake is insignificant, or when the decision is reversible if it later prove unwise.

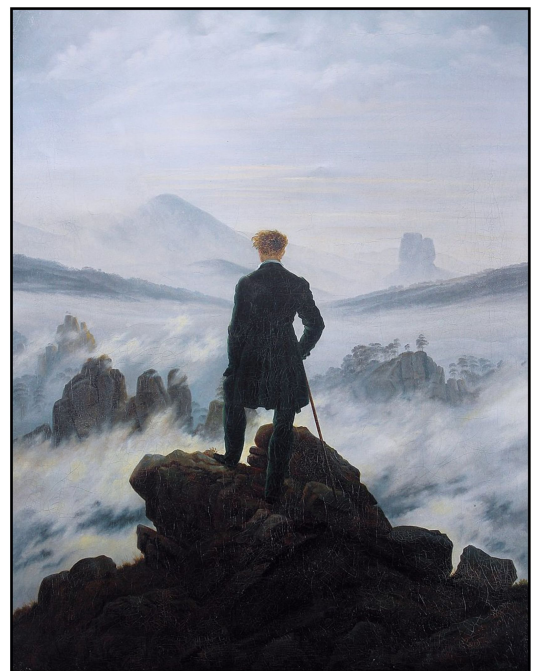
James assumed that deciding to believe is much like deciding to act. However, choosing to believe in God is not the same as choosing to join Nansen's polar expedition. One can (and does) choose to act in certain ways. However, one does not usually choose between beliefs if there is no evidence preferring one over the other (see the criticisms of Bertrand Russell, below).

James noted that his idea of the "momentousness" of a belief is related to Pascal's famous wager. Pascal proposed that it is better to believe in God than to remain an agnostic: if we are right, we are granted "eternal beatitude," and, if we are wrong, we lose nothing. James did not enjoy considering religious belief in the "language of the gaming-table." Nevertheless, he was apparently convinced by Pascal's logic. When things are that important, we must believe one way or another or risk losing all. James therefore proposed that

Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open," is itself a passional decision, □ just like deciding yes or no, □ and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.

James concludes his lecture with a rousing quotation from the English Jurist, James Fitzjames Stephens (1829-1894):

In all important transactions of life we have to take a leap in the dark... If we decide to leave the riddles unanswered, that is a choice; if we waver in our answer, that, too, is a choice: but whatever choice we make, we make it at our peril. If a man chooses to turn his back altogether on God and the future, no one can prevent him; no one can show beyond reasonable doubt that he is mistaken. If a man thinks otherwise and acts as he thinks, I do not see that any one can prove that he is mistaken. Each must act as he thinks best; and if he is wrong, so much the worse for him. We stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist through which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive. If we stand still we shall be frozen to death. If we take the wrong road we shall be dashed to pieces. We do not certainly know whether there is any right one. What must we do? Be strong and of a good courage. Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes. . . .



The image is wildly romantic. It brings to mind Casper David

Friedreich's *Wanderer over a Sea of Fog* (1812). The concept of the "leap of faith" – the act of believing something despite the lack of convincing evidence – was commonly used in the 19th Century to counter the objections of religious skeptics. The term is often attributed to Kierkegaard though he never used it (McKinnon, 1983).

James had used the image of the Alpine Climber in an earlier essay written in French on the "subjective method" (1877, discussed in Wernham, 1987, Chapter 2):

I find myself in a difficult place from which I can only escape by making a bold and dangerous leap. Though I wish to make the leap, I have never done so before, and I do not know if I have the ability. Let us suppose I use the subjective method: I believe what I desire. My confidence gives me strength and makes possible something which otherwise might not have been. I leap across the space and find myself out of danger. But suppose I doubt my ability because it has never before been demonstrated in such a situation: then I waver; I hesitate; at last, weak and trembling, I am compelled to an attempt by sheer despair; I miss my goal; I fall into the abyss. (my translation).

It is not clear whether James was proclaiming a right to believe when there is insufficient evidence, or whether he was asserting a duty to believe. Most people would support a general right to believe with the proviso that the belief does not harm others. Few, however, would say that we ought to believe something even though the evidence is not convincing.

James has been criticized for indulging in wishful thinking (reviewed in Koopman, 2017). When we decide to believe without any evidence, we run the clear risk of entering a fantasy world. On the other hand, perhaps we should try out new world-views. Provided they cause no harm. Crusades are not allowed.



Blaise Pascal (1623-1662)

Blaise Pascal was a French mathematician, physicist, and philosopher. He is most famous for his studies of probability, his experiments on atmospheric pressure and his proposal that beliefs might be determined based on what they entail rather than on the empirical evidence – Pascal's wager.

In the posthumously published *Pensées* (1670 Section III), Pascal points out that believing in God leads to a promise of Heaven whereas not believing in God has no long-term benefit. We must either believe or not. So

Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is.

The following illustration presents the premises that lead to Pascal's wager, and the decision matrix that urges us to believe in God. The estimated benefit of believing or not is

the sum (along the row in the decision matrix) of the probability-weighted benefits when God exists or not. The infinite rewards of belief in God completely outweigh the minor inconvenience of living life as a believer (C_g – a negative value). Similarly, the infinite penalties of not believing are far worse than the transient benefit of a life of indulgence (B_n – a positive value).

Pascal's Wager

A. Premises

1. The probability (P_g) that God exists is not zero
2. Either God exists or God does not exist: the probability of the latter is therefore $1-P_g$
3. The benefit for believing that God exists is infinite - eternal life in Heaven.
4. The cost (C_g) of believing in God is finite - a life of being good and abstaining from sin.
5. The benefit (B_n) of not believing in God is finite - a lifetime of indulgence.
6. The cost of not believing in God is infinite - death and damnation.

B. Decision Table

	God Exists	God Does Not Exist
Believe in God	$P_g * \infty$	$(1-P_g) * C_g$
Not Believe	$P_g * (-\infty)$	$(1-P_g) * B_n$

Pascal's logic falls apart in two ways (Bartha & Pasternack, 2018; Hájek, 2003, 2022). First, it does not discriminate among which of many possible Gods one should believe in. If there is a non-zero possibility of an Islamic God who rewards his followers with heaven and casts infidel Christians into hell, the infinite rewards and penalties associated with the Christian God are cancelled out. This is illustrated in the below. The astute observer will note that while the infinite

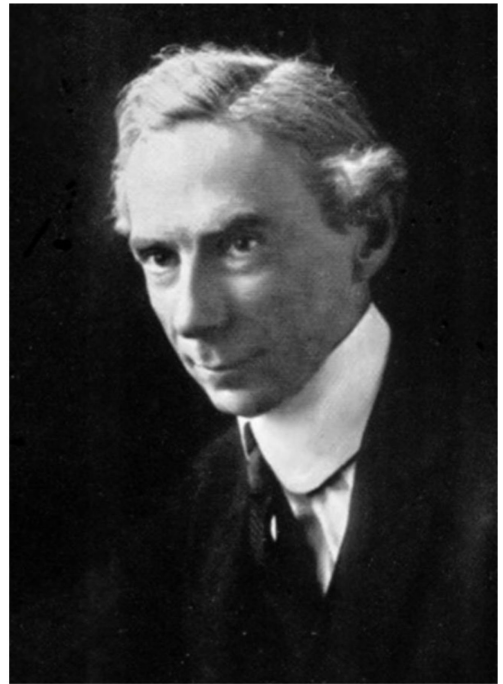
benefits and costs of believing in a particular God are cancelled out, the atheist is still stuck with probabilities of death and damnation regardless of which God exists. Perhaps, this is the human lot. The atheist, however, simply assumes that both P_g and P_a are zero.

Pascal's Wager with more than one God, e.g. there is a non-zero probability (P_a) of the Islamic God Allah as well as a non-zero probability (P_g) of the Christian God:

Decision Table

	Christian God Exists	Islamic God Exists	No God Exists
Christian Belief	$P_g * \infty$	$P_a * (-\infty)$	$(1-P_g-P_a)*C_g$
Islamic Belief	$P_g * (-\infty)$	$P_a * \infty$	$(1-P_g-P_a)*C_a$
Atheism	$P_g * (-\infty)$	$P_a * (-\infty)$	$(1-P_g-P_a)*B_n$

A second objection to Pascal's wager is that it presupposes not only that God might exist but also that God would reward the believer with heaven and damn the non-believer to hell. Among the credible possibilities are a benevolent God who would forgive the non-believer, and a strict God who would damn those that professed belief simply to get to heaven as hypocrites who did not "truly" believe in their hearts.



Bertrand Russell (1872-1970)

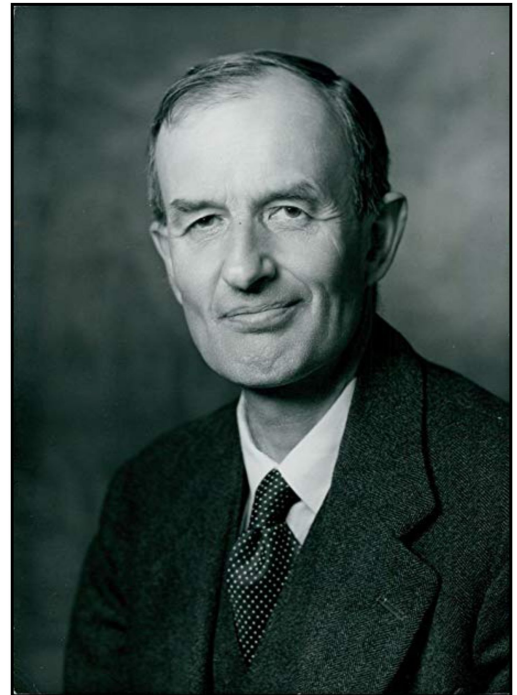
Bertrand Russell was an English philosopher, mathematician, and logician. He is most famous for the *Principia Mathematica* (1913) written together with A. N. Whitehead. This attempted to describe the basic axioms and rules underlying human logic and mathematics. Russell was also known for his pacifism and his agnosticism.

Russell was one of the first major critics of James' *The Will to Believe*. In an essay on *Pragmatism* (1910), he pointed out the James' arguments are appropriate to actions but have no real relevance to belief. He uses the example of a traveler at a fork in the road:

I come to a fork where there is no signpost and no passer-by, I have, from the point of view of action, a 'forced' option. I must take one road or other if I am to have any chance of reaching my destination; and I may have no evidence whatever as to which is the right road. I then *act* on one or other of the two possible hypotheses, until I find someone of whom I can ask the way. But I do not *believe* either hypothesis. My action is either right or wrong, but

my belief is neither, since I do not entertain either of the two possible beliefs. The pragmatist assumption that I believe the road I have chosen to be the right one is erroneous.

However, belief can mean different things to different people. Religious thinkers do not consider belief in the same way as a scientist or logician. In a religious context, one can decide to believe based upon the consequents that the belief will have – salvation, heaven, etc. – rather than on the evidence for the belief.



Henry Habberley Price (1899-1984)

H. H. Price was a Welsh philosopher with a major interest in perception and belief, and a minor interest in parapsychology. His 1961 Gifford lectures on *Belief* (published in 1969) analyzed the many ways in which we can believe.

He proposed that belief can be considered in two main ways – as an occurrence (a mental event) and as an attitude (a mental

state). The occurrence of belief is the moment when a person decides that something is true (based on evidence or on desire) or assents to consider it true. With respect to Russell's criticism that belief is not usually chosen, Price noted that we often come to a belief ("make up our minds") in much the same way as we decide to act. He uses as an example:

After waiting for him for over $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours I decided that John had missed the train.

Belief can also be considered as an attitude: to believe a proposition is to be disposed to act as if that proposition were true. Other attitudes are hoping, desiring, and knowing. Having an attitude may be either conscious or not. An attitude is not necessarily associated with any overt behavior: it simply represents a tendency to respond in a certain way.

As I discussed in a previous post on Belief and Heresy, Price also pointed out that "believing that" differs from "believing in" (Price, 1965). Believing-that is used with a proposition: it considers that a proposition is true based on the evidence. Believing-in is used with things, persons, or ideas: it not only claims that these exist (existed or will exist) but also affirms many other related propositions. Christ stated

I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live:
And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.
(*John* 11: 25-26)

Simply asserting that Christ existed is clearly not sufficient for a person to "believe in" Christ. One must also believe that he is divine, that he died so that those who believe in him do not have to die, that he was resurrected from death, and that he lives forever. Challenging requirements for one of a skeptical disposition. However, the reward is invaluable: eternal life.



Peter van Inwagen (1942-)

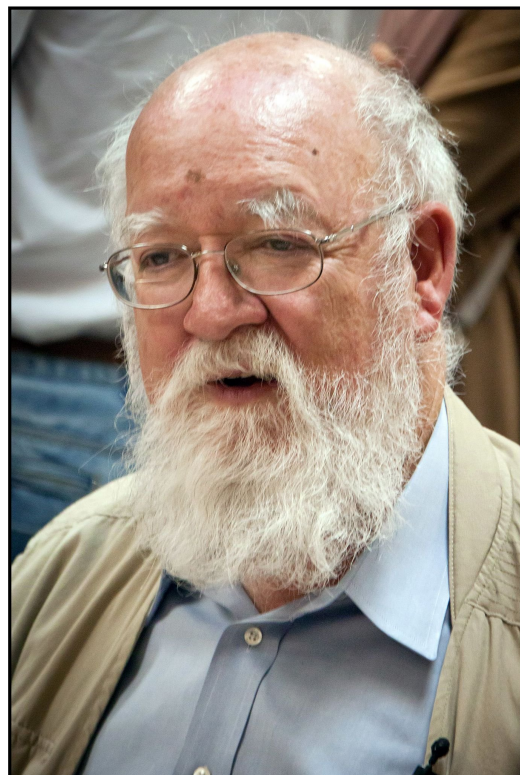
Peter van Inwagen is an American Christian philosopher who has written extensively on the philosophy of religion: *An Essay on Free Will* (1983), *The Problem of Evil* (2006), *Metaphysics* (2002).

In 1996 van Inwagen published a paper commenting Clifford's principle that we should not believe anything based upon insufficient evidence. He initially remarks that although all beliefs need to be based on evidence

a strict adherence to the terms of the principle would lead to a chain of requests for further evidence that would terminate only in such presumably unanswerable questions as What evidence have you for supposing that your sensory apparatus is reliable? or Yes, but what considerations can you adduce in support of the hypothesis that the future will resemble the past?

More importantly, he points out that Clifford's principle has mainly been applied in criticizing religious beliefs. He notes that for complicated issues in philosophy, politics, economics, and psychiatry, the available evidence even when

properly scrutinised often leads to a diversity of opinion. Each of us may have our own insight or intuition as to what is true. Just as we do not consider it morally wrong to have these individual beliefs in philosophy, politics, etc., so we should allow religious beliefs even when the evidence for them is (necessarily) incomplete.



Daniel C. Dennett (1942-)

Daniel Dennett is an American philosopher and cognitive scientist. He has written extensively on psychology (*Consciousness Explained*, 1992), evolution (*Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, 1996) and religion (*Breaking the Spell*, 2006). Together with Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris, he is considered one of "The Four Horsemen of the New Atheism."

One way to consider belief is as an interpretation of reality. Dennett has proposed that our brains are continually modelling what is going on in the world. What we are conscious of at any moment is as the "best draft" of our interpretive model

(Dennett, 1992). Our consciousness of our selves is an abstract “center of narrative gravity” that we use to interpret our experience.

Some philosophers and psychologists have denied the existence of beliefs (see Schwitzgel, 2019, for a review of “eliminativism”). Dennett considers beliefs (and other mental states) as helpful in interpreting the behavior of others who might have mental states similar to our own. He describes this mode of interpreting and predicting behavior as the “intentional stance:”

Here is how it works: first you decide to treat the object whose behavior is to be predicted as a rational agent; then you figure out what beliefs that agent ought to have, given its place in the world and its purpose. Then you figure out what desires it ought to have, on the same considerations, and finally you predict that this rational agent will act to further its goals in the light of its beliefs. A little practical reasoning from the chosen set of beliefs and desires will in most instances yield a decision about what the agent ought to do; that is what you predict the agent will do. (Dennett, 1987, p 17)

Whatever Gets You Thru the Night

We have touched on what various philosophers have thought about belief. What can we conclude?

To survive, human beings must understand what they can about the world in which they find themselves. In some contexts, our understanding has become highly accurate. Our perceptions tell us what things are and predict what they will do; our actions manipulate the world. In other contexts – in philosophy, politics and psychiatry, for example – we often have little understanding. We do not know whether the world has a purpose, how society could be optimally organized, or why our thinking

can become disordered. Rather than just accept these uncertainties, we try out possibilities – to see whether they both fit the world and give us comfort. Often these ideas are just hunches; sometimes they become considered opinions; occasionally they become beliefs. Our beliefs are the way we make sense of the world.

Are there ethical principles that determine what we can believe (Chignell, 2018; Schmidt & Ernst, 2020)? We should base our beliefs as much as possible on the evidence available to us. However, we should not retire to an attitude of universal skepticism. We must try out hypotheses about the what we do not know about world. We remain responsible for the consequences of our actions, even if we sincerely believed those actions appropriate.

Contemplating the smallness of humanity in the immensity of the universe is frightening. Our beliefs provide us with some way to handle this fear. In the words of John Lennon's 1974 song, they are "Whatever gets you thru the night."

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Cézanne

Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) learned to experience nature with the vividness of the Impressionists but evolved his own individual style of painting. How he perceived the world was as important as the way it appeared. For most of his life he lived and painted in Aix-en-Provence. He had no students and his work became recognized only toward the end of his life. Nevertheless, many of the proponents of the modernist movement that began in the first decade of the 20th Century acknowledged Cézanne as their artistic father (Hook, 2021). This post comments on some of his paintings.

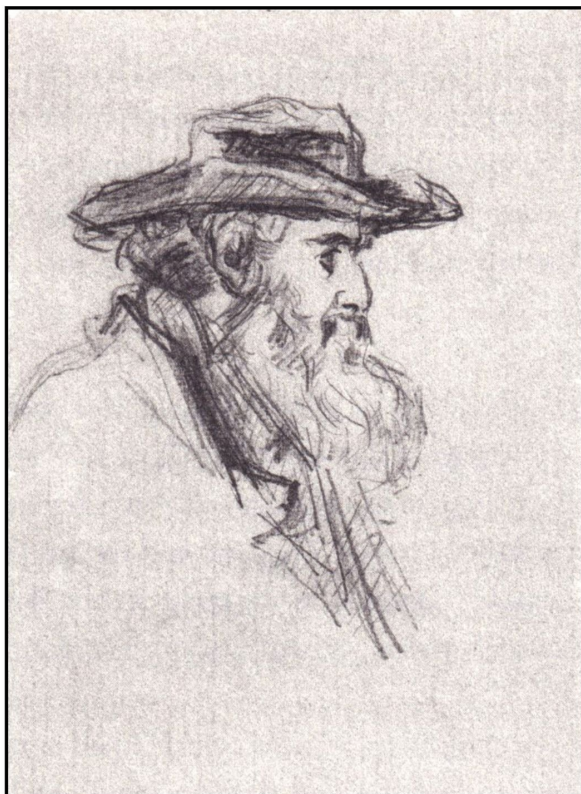
Early Life

Cézanne's father, a successful businessman and banker in Aix-en-Provence, wanted his son to carry on the family's banking business. However, Cézanne wished to become a painter and his father eventually gave in to his stubbornness. The young man came to Paris in 1861, took lessons in some of the painting studios and spent time studying and drawing in the Louvre (Schapiro, 1952; Danchev, 2010). He was impressed by the emotional force of Delacroix and intrigued by the iconoclasm of Manet. He later made his own versions of Manet's *Olympia* and *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* (both exhibited in 1863). He brooded and made paintings of rape and murder. His style was

generally dark and heavy. He seemed destined to be just another angry young man without significant talent.

Friendship with Pissarro.

However, during his studies in Paris, Cézanne became friends with Camille Pissarro (1830-1903). Pissarro was older but both were outsiders: Cézanne was an unsophisticated provincial and Pissarro was a Jew from the island of St Thomas in the Caribbean. Pissarro had taken up the idea of painting directly from nature (*en plein air*), molding shapes in colors rather than defining them with outlines. He was one of the founding members of the Impressionists and exhibited with them from 1874 to 1886. He was full of enthusiasm for this new movement and loved to discuss its theories with his younger colleague. Despite their different personalities – Pissarro was gentle and congenial, Cézanne rough and unsocial – the two painters became fast friends, exchanging pencil portraits of each other (from around 1874, Pissarro on the left and Cézanne on the right).



In the decade from 1871 to 1881, they often worked together in the environs of Paris (Pissarro, 2005). Pissarro lived in Pontoise, and for a while Cézanne lived in nearby Auvers. Sometimes Cézanne directly copied his colleague's paintings, sometimes they worked simultaneously, and sometimes Cézanne would revisit a scene that Pissarro had painted before. Under the tutelage of Pissarro, Cézanne lost his youthful darkness and began to paint what he saw rather than what he imagined.

However, the two painters maintained their individual styles. Pissarro worked continuously adding tiny points of color to the canvas. His paintings vividly portray the atmosphere of a landscape, capture the color of its light, and accurately delineate its perspective. Cézanne would often spend a long time contemplating what he saw before adding paint to the canvas. His colors were perhaps brighter than reality and they were put on the canvas in "patches" rather than dots. His perspective never really fit a single point of view.

The following illustration shows two paintings of *The Road at Pontoise*. The upper painting by Pissarro was made in 1875 and the lower by Cézanne about a year later. Cézanne's painting has a more limited field of view, his colors show more contrast and less definition, and his landscape contains no people.



Nancy Locke (2021) recounts the observations of a peasant who once watched the two painters at their easels in the countryside:

“M. Pissarro, en travaillant, *piquait* (et mon paysan faisait le geste), et M. Cézanne *plaquait* (autre geste).”

Selon cet observateur contemporain, Pissarro était plus susceptible de travailler avec un pinceau perpendiculaire à la toile, l’approchant avec un mouvement de tamponnage ou de piqûre, alors que Cézanne était plus enclin à se déplacer latéralement avec son pinceau ou son couteau à palette, travaillant ainsi dans le même plan que la toile.

[M. Pissarro, while working, “stung” (and my peasant made the gesture), and M. Cézanne “plastered” (another gesture). According to this contemporary observer, Pissarro was more likely to work with a brush perpendicular to the canvas, approaching it with a dabbing or stabbing motion, whereas Cézanne was more inclined to move his brush or palette knife laterally, thus working in the same plane as the canvas. (my translation)]

Cézanne later described his method of painting to Joachim Gasquet. However, Gasquet wrote down these conversations long after Cézanne had died and the words are likely as much Gasquet as Cézanne:

[L]entement les bases géologiques n’apparaissent, des couches s’établissent, les grands plans de ma toile, j’en dessine mentalement le squelette pierreux. Je vois affleurer les roches sous l’eau, peser le ciel. Tout tombe d’aplomb. Une pâle palpitation enveloppe les aspects linéaires. Les terres rouges sortent d’un abîme. Je commence à me séparer du paysage, à le voir. Je m’en dégage avec cette première esquisse, ces lignes géologiques. La géométrie, mesure de la terre. Une tendre émotion me prend. Des racines de cette émotion monte la sève, les couleurs. Une sorte de délivrance. Le rayonnement de l’âme, le regard, le mystère

extériorisé, l'échange entre la terre et le soleil, l'idéal et la réalité, les couleurs! Une logique aérienne, colorée, remplace brusquement la sombre, la têtue géométrie. Tout s'organise, les arbres, les champs, les maisons. Je vois. Par taches. L'assise géologique, le travail préparatoire, le monde du dessin s'enfonce, s'est écroulé comme dans une catastrophe. Un cataclysme l'a emporté, régénéré. Une nouvelle période vit. La vraie ! Celle où rien ne m'échappe, où tout est dense et fluide à la fois, naturel. Il n'y a plus que des couleurs, et en elles de la clarté, l'être qui les pense, cette montée de la terre vers le soleil, cette exhalaison des profondeurs vers l'amour. Le génie serait d'immobiliser cette ascension dans une minute d'équilibre, en suggérant quand même son élan. Je veux m'emparer de cette idée, de ce jet d'émotion, de cette fumée d'être au-dessus de l'universel brasier. Ma toile pèse, un poids alourdit mes pinceaux. Tout tombe. Tout retombe sous l'horizon. De mon cerveau sur ma toile, de ma toile vers la terre. Pesamment. Où est l'air, la légèreté dense? Le génie serait de dégager l'amitié de toutes ces choses en plein air, dans la même montée, dans le même désir. Il y a une minute du monde qui passe. La peindre dans sa réalité ! Et tout oublier pour cela. Devenir elle-même. Être alors la plaque sensible. Donner l'image de ce que nous voyons, en oubliant tout ce qui a paru avant nous. (Gasquet, 1921, pp. 136-137)

[S]lowly geographical foundations appear, the layers, the major planes form themselves on my canvas. Mentally I compose the rocky skeleton. I can see the outcropping of stones under the water; the sky weighs on me. Everything falls into place. A pale palpitation envelops the linear elements. The red earths rise from an abyss. I begin to separate myself from the landscape, to see it. With the first sketch, I detach myself from these geological lines. Geometry measures the earth. A feeling of tenderness comes over me. Some roots of this emotion raise the sap, the

colors. It's a kind of deliverance. The soul's radiance, the gaze, exteriorized mystery are exchanged between earth and sun, ideal and reality, colors! An airborne, colorful logic quickly replaces the somber, stubborn geography. Everything becomes organized: trees, fields, houses. I see. By patches: the geographical strata, the preparatory work, the world of drawing all cave in, collapse as in a catastrophe. A cataclysm has carried it all away, regenerated it. A new era is born. The true one! The one in which nothing escapes me, where everything is dense and fluid at the same time, natural. All that remains is color, and in color, brightness, clarity, the being who imagines them, this ascent from the earth toward the sun, this exhalation from the depths toward love. Genius would be to capture this ascension in a delicate equilibrium while also suggesting its flight. I want to use this idea, this burst of emotion, this smoke of existence above the universal fire. My canvas is heavy, a heaviness weighs down my brushes. Everything drops. Everything falls toward the horizon. From my brain onto my canvas, from my canvas toward the earth. Heavily. Where is the air, the dense lightness? It would take genius to discover the amity of all these things in the open air, in the same ascent, in the same desire. A minute of the world goes by. To paint it in its reality! And to forget every-thing else. To become reality itself. To be the photographic plate. To render the image of what we see, forgetting everything that came before. (Cochran translation in Doran and Cochran, 2001)

Je peins. Par taches. The French word *tache* most commonly denotes a spot, stain or blemish. In painting it means a patch of color. With these patches Cézanne was able to portray on the canvas what he perceived. Pissarro (2005), the grandson of the painter, remarked about how the French word is close to *touche* (touch) and that this brings to mind how touch is both a sensation and an action. Cézanne's painting was an active participation in his experience, not so much a representation

as a recreation of reality.

Over the years Cézanne began to distance himself from the Impressionists (Shiff, 1984). Verdi (1992) called him the “reluctant impressionist.” As well as heightening his color contrasts, he portrayed space quite differently. Each part of the painting existed on its own plane, and these planes intersected to form the structure of the scene. Cézanne was more interested in the underlying form of what he saw rather than its immediate appearance. His differentiation from the impressionists is visible below in two paintings made in the gardens of the Hermitage at Pontoise: Pissarro’s from 1867, and Cézanne’s from 1881. After 1881 Cézanne retired to Provence only coming to Paris occasionally.



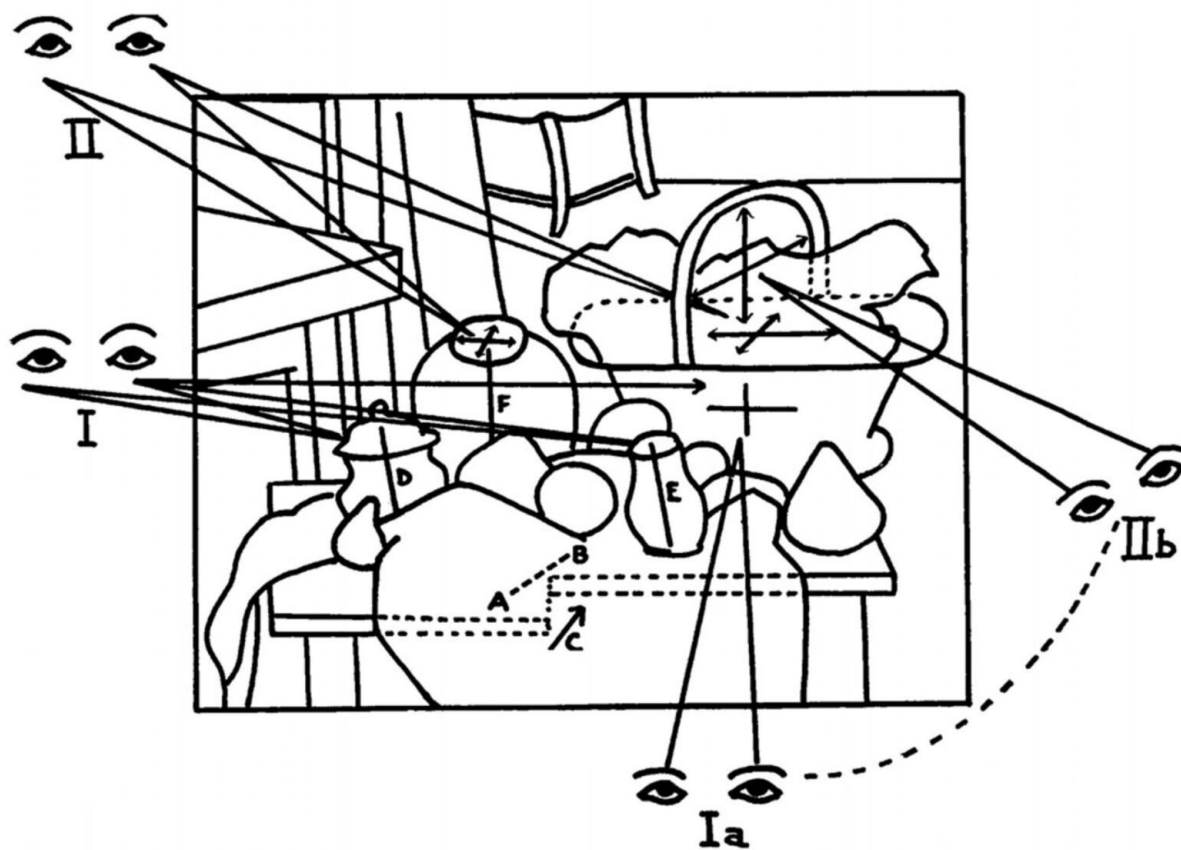
Still Lives

During his association with Pissarro in the 1870s, Cézanne developed his own individual technique for portraying still lifes. French painters had followed the Dutch in their enthusiasm for still life. The illustration below shows paintings by Chardin (1764), Manet (1864), Pissarro (1872) and Cézanne (1874). All contain a paring knife. In Cézanne's painting, the objects do not simply exist. The space tips upward. The objects seem to move towards the viewer, but are restrained by the rumpled tablecloth.



Multiple points of view were characteristic of Cézanne's later still lifes. The following figure shows his 1890 painting of *The Kitchen Table* as analyzed by Erle Loran (1943). The

diagram shows that the objects are viewed from two main heights (I and II on the left); the lower point of view is then located either directly in front or on the right (Ia and IIb). Some of the objects tilt as though they are about to fall (D and E) whereas others stand upright (F). The tabletop on the left is lower than on the right (ABC). These problems of perspective are not due to clumsiness. Cézanne considered each section of the painting by itself and then pieced the scene back together. Such an approach to reality was to become the driving force of Cubism.



The following illustration shows two more of Cézanne's still lifes. In the upper painting – *The Basket of Apples* (1893) the bottle leans to the left, the biscuits tilt upward, and the table top again has two different heights. This instability becomes even more marked in the lower painting of *Still Life with Apples* (1895), about which T. J. Clark (2022, p 75)

The whole array ... is disturbed and unstable (those spilling red spheres, that tipping plate, that earthquake landscape of blue and white cloth) yet composed and crystalline at the same time. And both the orderliness and the disturbance can strike us as features of seeing and features of manufacture – inventions, impositions, flashes of grim wit. Take the crisp fold at the top of the tablecloth, continuing the dark line of the dado [lower portion of a wall]. Or the whole brilliant hard decisiveness of the made pattern – made by machine and then by Cezanne the re-folder – on the blue-and-black drape. Or the anti-colour of the ice-block wall. </p>



The spatial instability of the paintings can make the viewer uneasy. The uncertainty of the artist is palpable. The critic Gustave Geffroy was perhaps the first to mention this *inquiétude* in a review of Cézanne's 1895 exhibition:

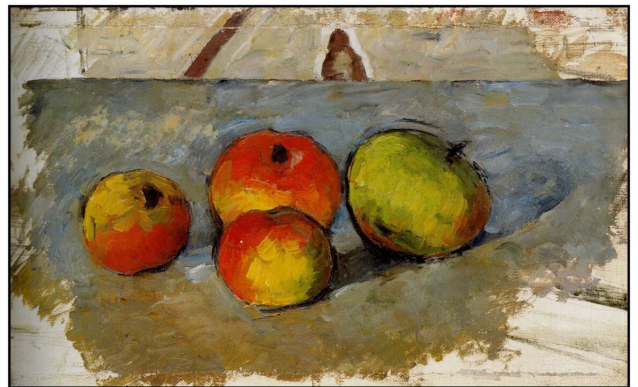
L'inquiétude de l'artiste l'a dominé. Cézanne n'en a pas moins raconté sa sensation profonde au spectacle de l'univers. Il importe peu que sa personnalité ait pris, pour s'exprimer, telle forme plutôt que telle autre. Regrettons qu'il n'ait pas doté son pays et son temps de l'oeuvre grandiose qui était en lui. Mais son individu ne subit de ce regret aucune déperdition, puisqu'il est présent, et bien présent, par toutes ces oeuvres où se mêlent, comme on ne l'a jamais vu davantage peut-être, la réflexion et la spontanéité. (Geffroy, 1900, p 218). </p>

[The anxiety (unease, disquiet) of the artist overcame him. Cézanne nevertheless recounted his deep experience of the universe. It matters little that his personality took, in order to express itself, one form rather than another. We are sorry that he did not endow his country and his time with the great work that was in him. But his achievement suffers no loss from this regret, since he is present, and very present, in all these works which mingle, more than we have ever seen before, reflection and spontaneity. (my translation)] </p>

Cézanne's Apples

At school in Aix, Cézanne had once come to the defence of the young Emile Zola who was being bullied by older students. The next day Zola brought Cézanne a basket of apples (Schapiro, 1968). The two became fast friends and Cézanne's apples became a recurring *motif* in his paintings, many of which simply show a group of apples on a surface (Leca, 2014). As illustrated below, each apple is defined by its colors. There are no outlines, only shadows. They represent things as they exist unto themselves (Armstrong, 2018). In his poem *To an Artist*,

Seamus Heaney (1984) describes “his coercion of the substance from green apples”

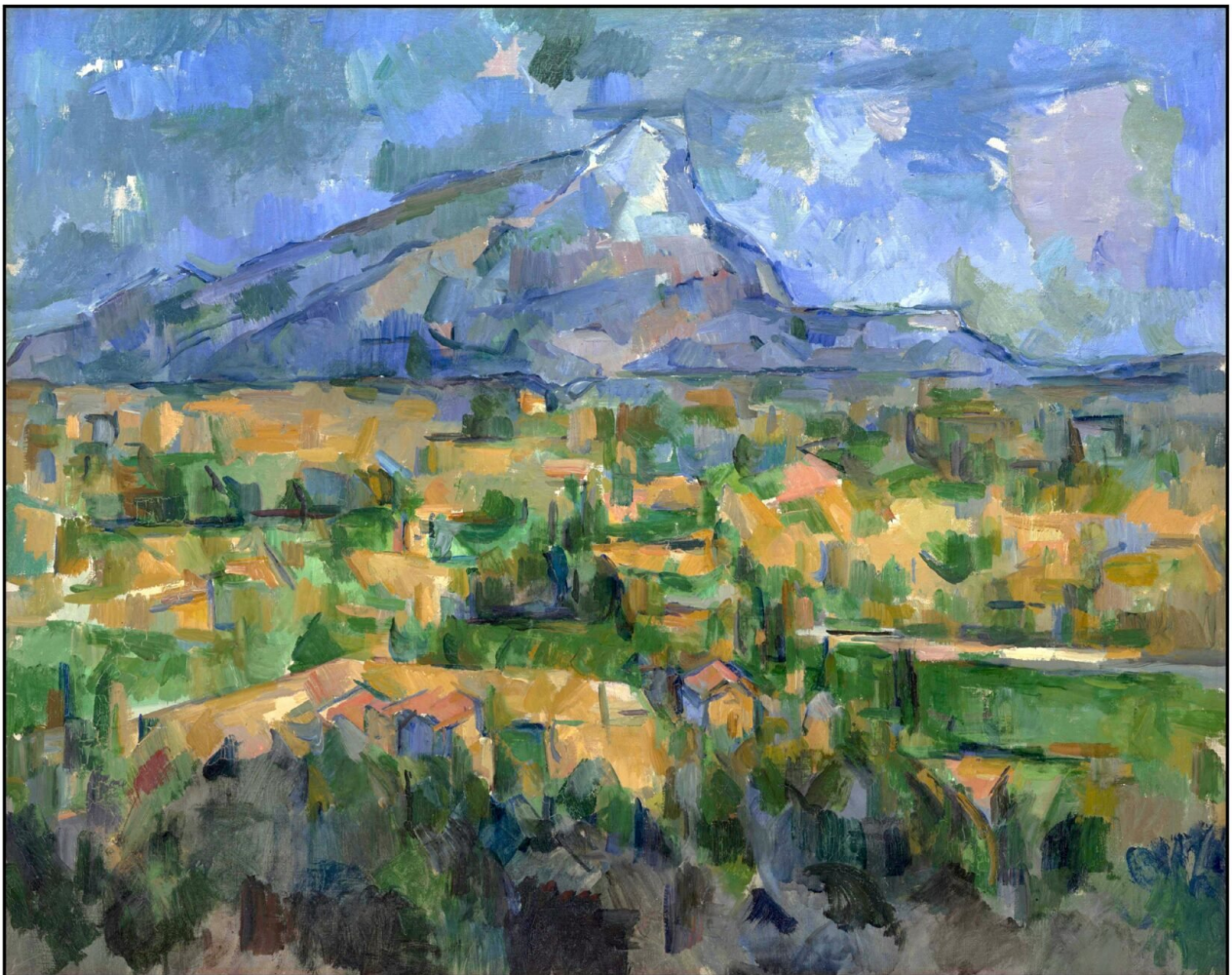


Mont Sainte Victoire

After he returned to Provence, Cézanne began a series of paintings depicting the mountain to the east of Aix-en-Provence: Mont Sainte Victoire. The following illustration shows two paintings from the mid 1890s, the upper one now in the Barnes Collection in Philadelphia and the lower in the Courtauld Collection in London.



As the years went on the depictions of the mountain became more abstract. The color patches expanded and the structure simplified. The following illustration shows a modern photograph of the mountain together with Cézanne's 1904 painting:



William Wilson commented on the multiplicity of the depiction:

the deep space represented in Cézanne's paintings is not the space of historical events; he has altered that space, bringing the distant nearer, and pushing the near back. As we look towards Mont Sainte-Victoire it is brought towards us, but Cézanne doesn't show the cross that had been erected on it. Anything might happen in historical space, but Cézanne did not want that; he wanted painting to be about what was happening, when what was happening was an experience of successive spontaneous visual sensations which include a feeling of earlier and later, of before and after, along with *now*. Looking at a landscape by Cézanne, it is as though in that space we would go a few yards to the left, some yards back, some more yards upward, and several yards *later*. (Wilson, 1988, p 193)

As the years went by, the paintings of Mont Sainte Victoire became more monumental. The following illustration shows two late depictions.



The paintings have become independent of their source, creations in their own right. The following is a statement by Cézanne as reported (much later) by Gasquet. It is likely exaggerated. The comment that *le paysage se pense en moi* does not ring true as something that Cézanne would have said, but it does depict the way that the critics and painters began to consider his achievement:

L'art est une harmonie parallèle à la nature. Que penser des imbéciles qui vous disent: le peintre est toujours inférieur à la nature! Il lui est parallèle. S'il n'intervient pas volontairement... entendez-moi bien. Toute sa volonté doit être de silence. Il doit faire taire en lui toutes les voix des préjugés, oublier, oublier, faire silence, être un écho parfait. Alors, sur sa plaque sensible, tout le paysage s'inscrira. Pour le fixer sur la toile, l'exterioriser, le métier interviendra ensuite, mais le métier respectueux qui, lui aussi, n'est prêt qu'à obéir, à traduire inconsciemment, tant il sait bien sa langue, le texte qu'il déchiffre, les deux textes parallèles, la nature vue, la nature sentie, celle qui est là... (il montrait la plaine verte et bleue) celle qui est ici... (il se frappait le front) qui toutes deux doivent s'amalgamer pour durer, pour vivre d'une vie moitié humaine, moitié divine, la vie de l'art, écoutez un peu... la vie de Dieu. Le paysage se reflète, s'humanise, se pense en moi. Je l'objective, le projette, le fixe sur ma toile. (Gasquet, 1921, pp. 131-132)

[Art is a harmony parallel to nature. What would you think of idiots who would tell you, the painter is always inferior to nature! They are parallel, if the artist doesn't intentionally intervene ... hear me well. His entire will must be silent. He must silence all prejudice within himself. He must for-get, forget, be quiet, be a perfect echo. Then the full landscape will inscribe itself on his photographic plate. In order to fix it on his canvas, to exteriorize it, his craft comes into action. But it must be a respectful

craft which, itself also, is ready only to obey, to translate unconsciously so long as it knows its language well, the text it deciphers, these two parallel texts: nature seen and nature felt, the nature which is out there ... (he indicates the blue and green plain) and the nature which is in here ... (he taps himself on the forehead) both of which must unite in order to endure, to live a life half human, half divine, the life of art, listen a little ... the life of God. The landscape is reflected, becomes human, and becomes conscious in me. I objectify it, project it, fix it on my canvas. (Cochran translation)

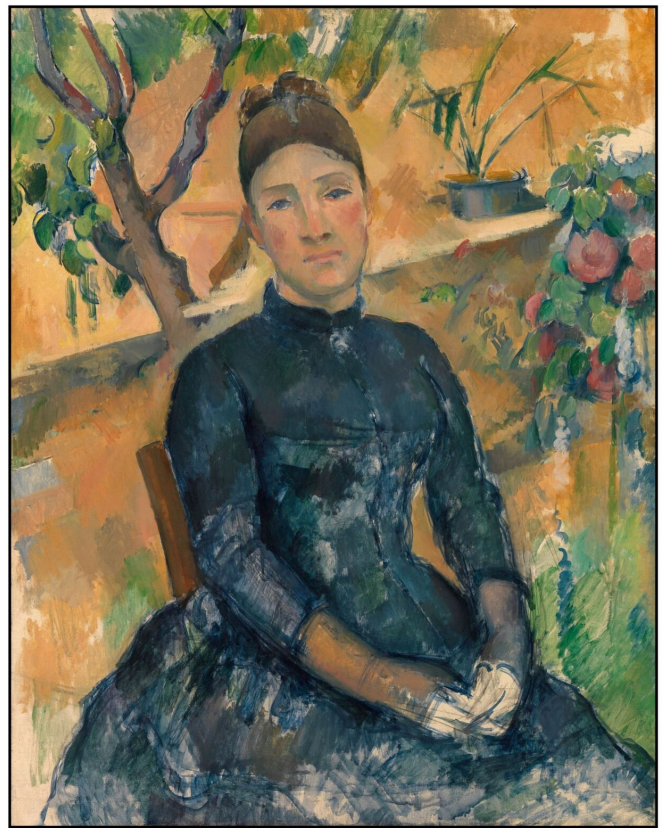
First Recognition

Cézanne bought his paint supplies from Julien Tanguy (the same Père Tanguy that was painted by Vincent Van Gogh) in Paris, and left some paintings with him for possible sale. When Tanguy died in 1894, the dealer Ambroise Vollard obtained some of Cézanne's paintings from the sale of his estate. He then contacted Cézanne, and arranged for his first solo exhibition in 1895. Cézanne suddenly became a success.

Younger painters found inspiration in the vividness and the uncertainty of Cézanne's still lifes. In 1900 Maurice Denis painted his *Hommage à Cézanne* showing Cézanne's 1880 painting *Still Life with Compotier* being admired by artists and critics. The persons illustrated are from left to right: Odilon Redon, Edouard Vuillard, André Mellario (in top hat), Ambroise Vollard (behind the easel), Maurice Denis, Paul Ranson, Ker-Xavier Roussel, Pierre Bonnard (with pipe) and Marthe Denis.



Several portraits were included in Cézanne's first exhibition (Elderfield, 2017). Below are shown two 1891 portraits of Madame Cézanne (Marie-Hortense Fiquet, his one-time model and mother of his son). The portraits lack the fine detail that characterized the paintings of classical artists. Yet facial perception depends more on general form than on details, and Cézanne's paintings grasp this form. The portraits have a monumentality – as if the sitter was as important to the painter as his beloved Mont Sainte Victoire.



The poet Rainer Maria Rilke was impressed by the portrait on the left:

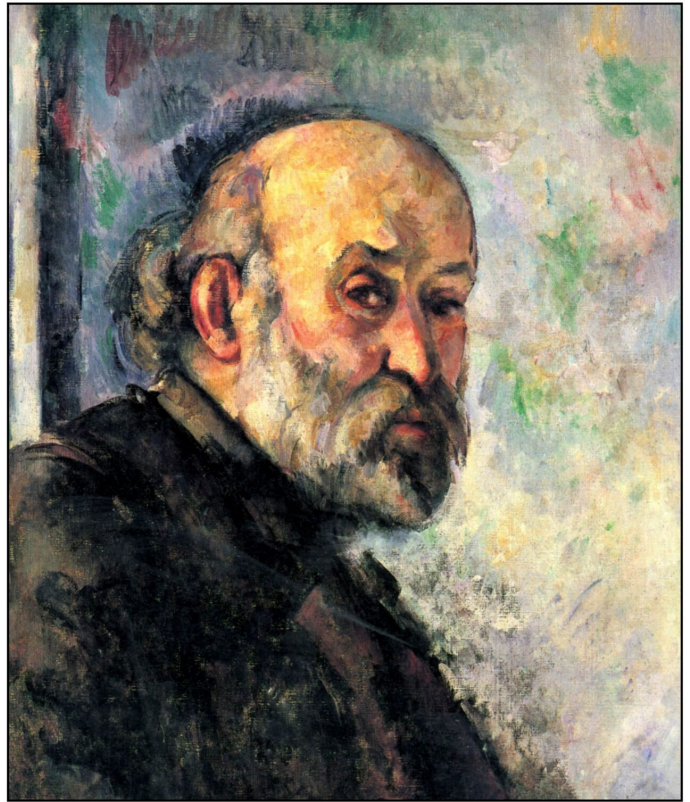
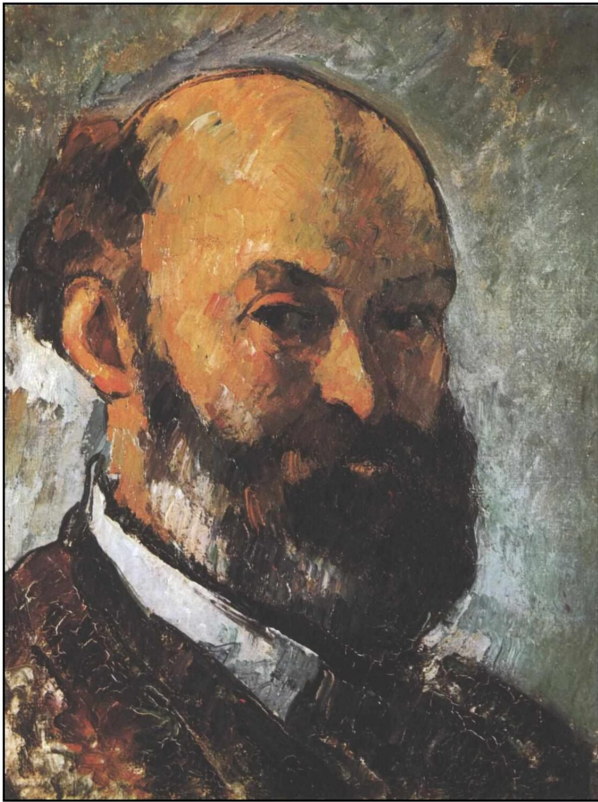
A red, upholstered low armchair has been placed in front of an earthy-green wall in which a cobalt-blue pattern (a cross with the center left out) is very sparingly repeated; the round bulging back curves and slopes forward and down to the armrests (which are sewn up like the sleeve-stump of an armless man). The left armrest and the tassel that hangs from it full of vermillion no longer have the wall behind

them but instead, near the lower edge, a broad stripe of greenish blue, against which they clash in loud contradiction. Seated in this red armchair, which is a personality in its own right, is a woman, her hands in the lap of a dress with broad vertical stripes that are very lightly indicated by small, loosely distributed flecks of green yellows and yellow greens, up to the edge of the blue-gray jacket, which is held together in front by a blue, greenly scintillating silk bow. In the brightness of the face, the proximity of all these colors has been exploited for a simple modeling of form and features: even the brown of the hair roundly pinned up above the temples and the smooth brown in the eyes has to express itself against its surroundings. It's as if every part were aware of all the others—it participates that much; that much adjustment and rejection is happening in it; that's how each daub plays its part in maintaining equilibrium and in producing it: just as the whole picture finally keeps reality in equilibrium. (Rilke, 1907, translated 1985 pp 70-71)

The following illustration shows Cézanne's portrait of the critic Gustave Geffroy (1896) seated at a desk that expands irrationally toward the reader and the unfinished eyeless portrait of the dealer Ambroise Vollard (1899).

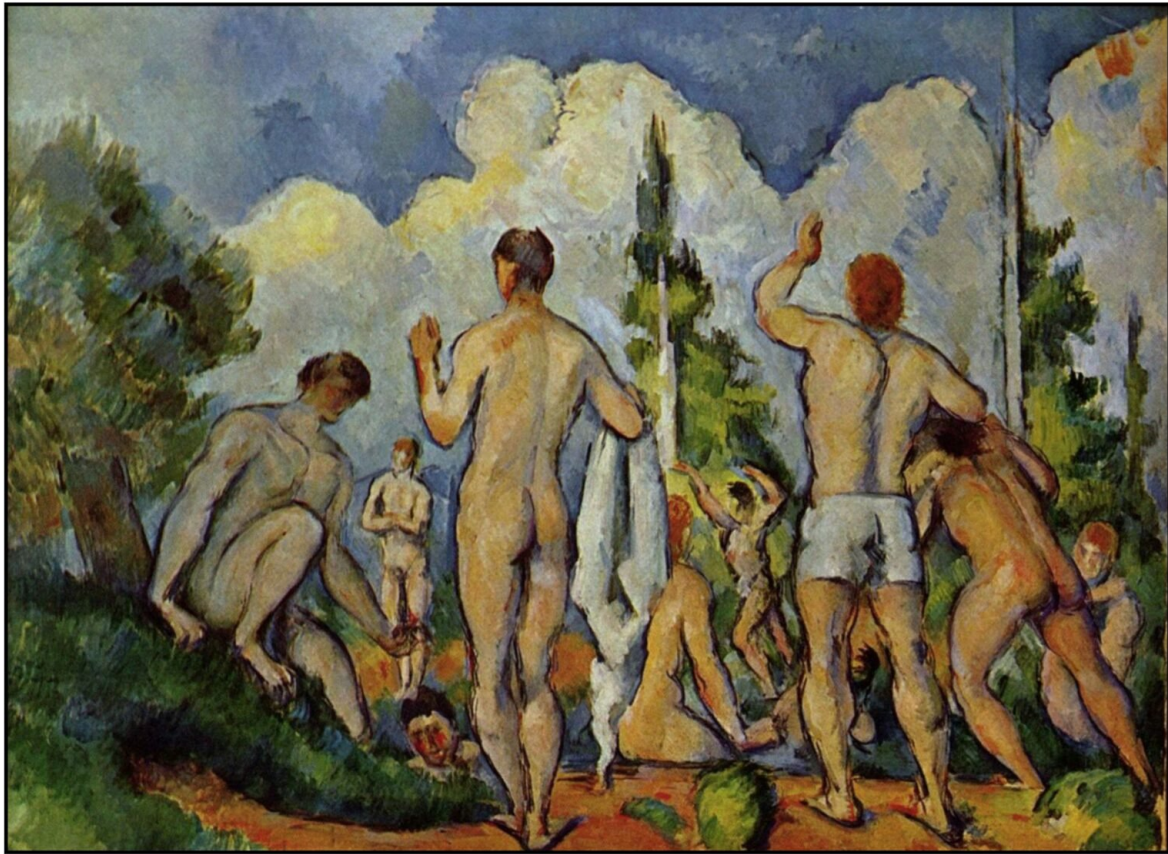


Cézanne produced many self-portraits. Those illustrated below are from 1880, when he had decided on his way of painting, and from 1895, when he had attained success but had begun to doubt his ability to make it significant.



The Bathers

Cézanne's fondest memories of childhood were the times he spent swimming with Zola and other friends in the rivers and lakes near Aix-en-Provence. Throughout his life he painted scenes of bathers (Krumrine, 1989; Garb1996)). In the early years of the 20th Century, he worked on several large paintings of bathers which were left unfinished at the time of his death in 1906. He did not use models. His figures were based on drawings he had made as a student in Paris, on photographs and on prints of the old masters (Verdi, 1992, Chapter 6). The following illustration shows a painting of male bathers from 1894, and one of the large paintings of female bathers unfinished at his death:



The very incompleteness of the late works became part of their appeal. Cézanne was attempting to find humanity's lost innocence. His inability was later interpreted as reflecting the difficulty of perceiving a world that may not be where we wish to live. This conflict between consciousness and reality became a major part of the later philosophy of existentialism – the search for meaning in a meaningless world. Merleau-Ponty remarked in his 1948 essay on *Cézanne's Doubt*

The meaning of what the artist is going to say *does not exist* anywhere– not in things, which as yet have no meaning, nor in the artist himself, in his unformulated life.

The artist must attempt to create this meaning in his work (Alsdorf, 2010; Rutherglen, 2004). The following is from the poem *Morning in the Studio: Les Grandes Baigneuses* by Maitreyabandhu (2019).

They were like dinosaurs in the swaggering green,
insecurely sexed with their hands above their heads.
He wanted earthed Etruscan statuary; he wanted
voluptuaries of the sun, but some were missing limbs
or had their heads blown off, others had broken
wrists
and severed fingers. They were like crippled monkeys
under cathedral trees: they were the century to
come.

The final illustration shows Emile Bernard's 1904 photograph of Cézanne in front of one of his unfinished paintings of *Les Grandes Baigneuses*. The detail on the left of the painting (now in the Barnes Collection) was later changed but the painting remained incomplete at the time of his death.



The Creative Artist

Medina (1995, pp 122-125) remarks on how a Cézanne's painting becomes independent of the experience that led to it. She likens it to *The Poem that Took the Place of a Mountain*, one of the last poems written by Wallace Stevens (1954).

There it was, word for word,
The poem that took the place of a mountain.

He breathed its oxygen,
Even when the book lay turned in the dust of his table.

It reminded him how he had needed
A place to go to in his own direction,

How he had recomposed the pines,
Shifted the rocks and picked his way among clouds,

For the outlook that would be right,
Where he would be complete in an unexplained completion:

The exact rock where his inexactnesses
Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had edged,

Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,
Recognize his unique and solitary home.

Death of an Artist

Cézanne tried continuously to make his painting meaningful. His art was his life. He painted right up to his death:

he was caught in a storm while working in the field. Only after having kept at it for two hours under a steady downpour did he start to make for home; but on the way he dropped exhausted. A passing laundry-wagon stopped, and the driver took him home. His old housekeeper came to the door. Seeing her master prostrate and almost lifeless, her first impulse was to run to him and give him every attention. But

just as she was about to loosen his clothes, she stopped, seized with alarm. It must be explained that Cezanne could not endure the slightest physical contact. Even his son, whom he cherished above all ("Paul is my horizon," he used to say), never dared to take his father's arm without saying, "Permit me, papa." And Cezanne, notwithstanding the affection he entertained for his son, could never resist shuddering.

Finally, fearing lest he pass away if he did not have proper care, the good woman summoned all her courage and set about to chafe his arms and legs to restore the circulation, with the result that he regained consciousness without making the slightest protest—which was indeed a bad sign. He was feverish all night long.

On the following day he went down into the garden, intending to continue a study of a peasant which was going rather well. In the midst of the sitting he fainted; the model called for help; they put him to bed, and he never left it again. He died a few days later, on October 22, 1906. (Vollard, 1919)

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Belief and Heresy

Religious belief differs from everyday belief. Since it cannot be tested or independently confirmed, religious belief must be accepted on faith. Religious belief generally starts with a few powerful and attractive ideas. For example: would it not be wonderful if we did not have to die? As time passes these foundational principles are elaborated and bolstered by other equally untestable beliefs to form a relatively coherent set of teachings. These “doctrines” can then organize communities of the faithful, govern the behavior of believers, and attract

new converts. Some believers may choose to interpret the foundational ideas of a faith differently from the system of beliefs that are considered “orthodox” (Greek: *ortho* straight, correct + *doxa*, opinion). Beliefs that differ from the orthodox are termed heretical (Greek: *hairesis*, choice). Heresies are usually considered dangerous since they can easily disrupt the accepted doctrine and question the power of those who promote orthodoxy. Heresy occurs in the history of all the world’s religions (Henderson, 1988) This post limits itself to the early Christian beliefs and heresies about the nature of God, particularly those concerning the Trinity.

Belief and Belief-In

In philosophy and psychology belief is considered the “attitude” we take when we regard something as true (Schwitzgebel, 2021). Beliefs are for the most part unconscious. They come to consciousness when the belief requires action. Simple beliefs are typically expressed using a proposition: I believe that ... Most would propose that there are degrees of belief. I am more certain (or confident) that the sun will come up tomorrow than that I shall win the lottery. The confidence I have in a belief comes from how much supporting evidence I have amassed for it. When fully justified, my belief can be considered “knowledge.”

When belief is used with a direct object, it typically means having confidence in the truth or accuracy of someone or something. Thus, I can believe the witness when she describes what happened to her. Or I can believe the newspaper’s account of the event.

Saying that I “believe in” something has various meanings (Price, 1965; Williams, 1992; MacIntosh, 1994). In the simplest case, believing in something just means believing that it exists. When I say that I believe in fairies, I am just asserting that fairies exist. Typically, such statements have little in the way of justification. If the belief were

justified, one would not need to state it in this way.

“Believe-in” often implies a positive evaluation. When I state that I believe in my doctor, I am claiming that she not only exists but that she is good at what she does. This evaluative usage extends to more abstract ideas: when assert that I believe in democracy I mean that I consider it better than other types of government.

In the religious sense, the phrase “believe in” includes beliefs in both the existence and the goodness of the object of belief, but also requires belief in a wealth of associated ideas (Luhrman, 2018). One of the foundational ideas of Christianity is expressed in Christ’s comments to Martha just before raising her brother Lazarus from the dead.

I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live:
And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.
(*John* 11: 25-26)

Simply asserting that Christ existed and that he was a force for good is clearly not sufficient for the requirement that a person “believe in” Christ. One must also believe that he is divine, that he died so that those who believe in him do not have to die, that he was resurrected from death, and that he lives forever. Challenging requirements for one of a skeptical disposition. Such beliefs are not easy. However, the reward is invaluable: eternal life.

A Life of Jesus

For many years scholars have sought to determine which of the episodes in the life of Jesus reported in the gospels happened, and which were invented after the fact. This search for the “historical Jesus” (e.g. Schweitzer, 1910; Crossan, 1991; Meier, 1991; Wilson, 1992; Robinson, 2011) is controversial and highly subjective.

Jesus was a Galilean. He was likely born and grew up in Nazareth. There is no historical evidence for a Roman census, and the story of Bethlehem was probably invented to link the birth of Jesus to the line of David. Jesus likely interacted with John the Baptist, whose life and execution are noted in non-scriptural histories.

Jesus then became a preacher. He attracted a small group of disciples and large crowds of followers. He championed the poor and the dispossessed. He proposed that all the commandments could be subsumed in the simple instructions to love God and to love one's neighbor. He promoted the idea of forgiveness instead of vengeance.

He considered himself a simple human being – a “Son of Man;” yet, he also felt that he had been specially chosen by God to teach or lead his people – a “Son of God.” The Greek word *christos* (Christ) means the “appointed one,” and is equivalent to the Hebrew word *masiah* (Messiah). Jesus preached the coming of a “Kingdom of Heaven” but it is not clear what this meant: perhaps an independent Jewish state, or perhaps simply a community of people working together for the common good.

His simplification of the commandments and his criticism of the temple antagonized the priests; his call for a new Kingdom of Heaven alarmed the Roman powers that occupied the land. He was tried by both the Jews and the Romans. He was found guilty of blasphemy and of sedition. He was crucified and died upon a cross. His disciples were devastated.

Jesus was likely buried in the tomb of one of his followers. Nothing that happened after this is clear. Perhaps the tomb was found empty. This could then have triggered the hope that Jesus had been resurrected.

The preceding paragraphs have presented my personal idea of the historical Jesus. The following is from Ehrman's 2012 book *Did Jesus exist?*

Jesus was a Jew who came from northern Palestine (Nazareth) and lived as an adult in the 20s of the Common Era. He was at one point of his life a follower of John the Baptist and then became a preacher and teacher to the Jews in the rural areas of Galilee. He preached a message about the “kingdom of God” and did so by telling parables. He gathered disciples and developed a reputation for being able to heal the sick and cast out demons. At the very end of his life, probably around 30 CE, he made a trip to Jerusalem during a Passover feast and roused opposition among the local Jewish leaders, who arranged to have him put on trial before Pontius Pilate, who ordered him to be crucified for calling himself the king of the Jews. (p 269)

Jesus as God

The empty tomb could have easily led to ideas that Jesus had risen from the dead. Any such resurrection would have entailed supernatural intervention. Jesus had claimed to be the Messiah. Could he perhaps have been even more special? Perhaps Jesus was himself divine. From such thinking came John’s idea of Jesus as the Word (Greek, *logos* – the order underlying the universe):

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

The same was in the beginning with God.

All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.

In him was life; and the life was the light of men. (*John* 1:1-4)

Yet Jesus had been so terribly human in his suffering. From such thoughts came the idea of the incarnation. Though divine, Jesus was born as a human being:

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we

beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. (*John* 1: 14)

The first person to recognize the divinity of Jesus was John the Baptist, who noted that as Jesus was being baptized

I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him. (*John* 1:32)

From these ideas of Father, Son and Spirit came the idea of a triune God, and a new religion based on the resurrection of Christ, who died to save us from our sins.

After the crucifixion the disciples saw the resurrected Jesus upon on a mountain in Galilee:

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:

Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen. (*Matthew*, 28: 18-20).

This is the only acknowledgement of the Trinity in the gospels. Translations more modern than the King James Version use the name "Holy Spirit" for the third member of the Trinity. These verses may be a later addition to the original gospel (see discussion by Schaberg, 1980; Funk et al, 1996; Thellman, 2019). However, the same baptismal formula is used in the *Didache* (Teachings of the Apostles: O'Loughlin, 2010; Jefford, 2013), which was written soon after Matthew's gospel (now dated to about 80 CE). Christians were clearly aware of the Trinity before the end of the 1st Century CE.

Trinitarian Doctrines

Although it occasionally mentions the Trinity, the New

Testament does not describe the nature of a three-part God (Wainwright, 2011; Young, 2006). Rather, the doctrine of the Trinity was proposed by theologians during the second and third Centuries CE (Evans, 2003; Dünzl, 2007; Hillar, 2012; Phan, 2011; Tuggy 2020b). Despite twenty centuries of study, it remains an idea impossible to understand: a stumbling block to belief. Buzzard and Hunting (1999) called it “Christianity’s self-inflicted wound.”

Justin Martyr (100-165 CE), an early Christian convert from Palestine, taught in Rome during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, and was beheaded for his beliefs. He was the first to propose that God the Father and God the Son were of the same substance (Greek: *homoousios*). However, this idea made no claim as to whether God the Father preceded the Son or were they both coequal and coeternal.

Sabellius (who taught around 200 CE) was North African Christian who came to Rome to preach the gospel. His ideas are only known from those who condemned them as heretical. He appears to have believed that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were but three “aspects” or “modes” of the one God. He purportedly used an analogy to the Sun, which has a circular form (Father), gives forth light (Son), and provides warmth (Spirit).

Tertullian (155-220 CE) from Carthage was the first Christian theologian to use the word “trinity” (Latin *trinitas*) to describe Godhead. He argued against Christians like Sabellius who proposed that there was only one God – the monarchians (Greek *mono*, one + *arkhia*, rule). Tertullian claimed that God is three separate persons each of the same substance: three entities with one essence.

This concept of the Trinity could not easily explain the nature Christ – how could he be human if his essence was divine? This controversy persists to this day, the Western churches considering Christ to be one person with two natures

(diaphysitism), and the Eastern churches believing Christ to have only one nature that somehow combines both the human and the divine (miaphysitism).

Tertullian's version of the Trinity also did not clarify whether all three persons had existed for ever. Arius (256-336 CE), a charismatic Libyan preacher, taught that God was composed of three persons but believed the Father created both the Son and the Spirit when he created the universe. The Father alone was infinite, eternal, and almighty. Before the creation only the Father existed. Arius was vigorously opposed by Athanasius (298-373 CE), the bishop of Alexandria, who taught that all three persons of the Trinity were coequal and coeternal.

These theologians vehemently argued that those who disagreed with them should be condemned as heretics and excommunicated from the Church. Many early Christian thinkers were far more concerned with the nature of a God they could not understand than with the moral teachings of Christ. Compassion and forgiveness were not in their nature.

Constantine

At the age of 34 years, Constantine (272-337 CE) was initially acclaimed Roman Emperor after the death of his father Constantius in 306 CE. However, the empire was then governed by 5 co-rulers, all of whom desired to be the sole emperor. Over the next 18 years, these co-rulers battled for supremacy.



In the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 CE, Maxentius, who had just proclaimed himself emperor, attempted to prevent Constantine's entry into Rome. Just before the battle, Constantine saw in the sky a vision of a cross and the words *En touto nika* (Greek: With this sign you shall conquer). He therefore used as his military standard (Latin, *labarum*) the *Chi-Rho* symbol (a combinations of the first two letters of Christ's name in Greek χ *chi* and ρ *rho*). Illustrated on the right is a 4th Century Roman sculpture with the Chi-rho symbol depicting the resurrection of Christ leaving the Roman soldiers to guard an empty tomb. Constantine was victorious. Thenceforth, Christianity was the religion of his army. Illustrated below is Bernini's sculptural representation Constantine's vision:



Ultimately, Constantine become sole emperor in 324 CE. He established his imperial capital at Constantinople, and made Christianity the imperial religion. History is not clear about Constantine's personal relationship to Christianity. His mother Helena may have been a Christian when she married his father Constantius, and may have influenced her son's

thinking. She certainly was a fervent believer at the time that Constantine became emperor. From 326 to 328 CE, she made a pilgrimage to Palestine. Legend has it that she discovered in Jerusalem the cross on which Jesus had been crucified.

Constantine was not baptized until just before his death in 337 CE. He may have delayed because of personal doubts about the Christian religion, or he may have wished to absolve himself of as much sin as possible before dying. Constantine was baptized by Eusebius (Greek: pious) of Nicomedia, a priest who followed the teachings of Arius. By then, however, the emperor had promoted an orthodoxy that therefore made him a heretic.

The Nicene Creed

After becoming sole emperor, Constantine quickly realized that, if he wished to unify the empire through one religion, he would have to bring together the many feuding factions of Christianity. In 325 CE, he therefore convened the First Ecumenical (Greek: “concerning the whole inhabited earth”) Council at Nicaea a few miles south of Constantinople (in the modern city of Iznik). Theologians from all the reaches of the empire gathered to decide what it meant to be a Christian. They produced a statement of faith that became known as the Nicene Creed:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things, visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, only begotten, that is, of the substance of the Father; God of God; Light of light; very God of very God; begotten, not made; being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made, both things in heaven and things in earth; who for us men and for our salvation came down, and was incarnate, and was made man; who suffered, and rose again the third day; and ascended into heaven; and shall come again to judge the quick and the dead. And in the Holy Ghost, etc. (Plaff,

1885)

The “etc” likely means some formula known to all, such as

. . . in one baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, and in one Holy Catholic Church; and in the resurrection of the flesh; and in eternal life

Appended to the creed was a statement specifically condemning the ideas of Arius:

And those who say There was a time when He was not, or that Before He was begotten He was not, or that He was made out of nothing; or who say that The Son of God is of any other substance, or that He is changeable or unstable,—these the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes.



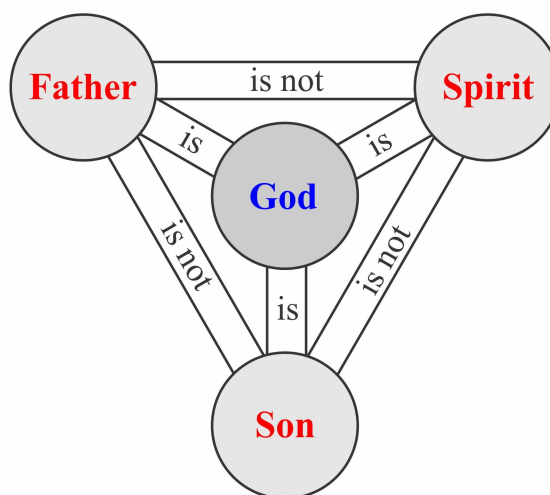
The Nicene Creed did not unify the Christian believers. Those that believed in Arius’ concept of the Trinity were formally damned as heretics. However, by that time Arianism had become the version of Christianity accepted through much of Northern Europe, and these ideas soon came to Italy with the barbarian invasions. Theodoric the Great, the Arian King of the Ostrogoths, built the great church now called the Basilica of

Sant' Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna in 504 CE. Mosaics showing the king and his court were later replaced with images of curtains, as Rome later re-exerted the orthodox views of the Trinity. However, the hands of the heretics remain on the columns (illustration on the right)

The Nicene Creed said little about the Holy Spirit. A revised creed, proclaimed by the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE, described

[https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Catholic_Encyclopedia_\(1913\)/Nicene_and_Niceno-Constantinopolitan_Creed](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Catholic_Encyclopedia_(1913)/Nicene_and_Niceno-Constantinopolitan_Creed)

the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who together with the Father and the Son is to be adored and glorified, who spoke by the Prophets.



Christians were then left with the orthodox view of a Trinitarian God composed of three separate but consubstantial persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In the early Middle Ages this concept of the Godhead came to be represented by the shield of faith (*scutum fidei*), illustrated on the right. Three is one and one is three. An incomprehensible doctrine was thus promulgated by theologians at the behest of an emperor in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to unite and prolong his empire.

The Latin Churches in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire later added the words “and the Son” (*filioque*) to describe the procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son. To state that the Spirit proceeded only from the Father alone suggested an Arian heresy, i.e. that the Father was before the Son. The Eastern Church felt that this addition to the creed undervalued the importance of the Holy Spirit and subverted the authority of the Councils that wrote the original creed. The *filioque* controversy became one of the causes leading to the schism between the Eastern and Western Churches in 1054.

The creeds revised and proposed by the Ecumenical Councils were all focused on the nature of the Trinity. They also included the necessity of baptism, the remission of sins, the foundation of the church, the resurrection of the body and the life eternal. However, they failed to mention the main teachings of Jesus: the necessity to love one’s neighbors and to forgive them their trespasses.

The Triumph of Thomas Aquinas over the Heretics

This post will conclude with a description of a Renaissance fresco by Filippino Lippi in the Carafa Chapel of the Church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva in Rome. The fresco illustrates the early heresies of Christianity. This fresco was also described by Charles Freeman in the introduction to his 2002 book *The Closing of the Western Mind*. However, he used it not so much to illustrate the triumph of orthodoxy over heresy as to acclaim the ascent of reason, as represented by Aquinas and his Aristotelian logic, over the blind faith that had after the Council of Nicaea impeded rational thought.

In 1280 the Dominicans began building a gothic church on the site of a Roman Temple to Minerva near the Pantheon. The interior of the church Santa Maria Sopra Minerva was finished by 1475, though the façade (designed by Carlo Moderna) was not completed until 1725. Cardinal Oliviero Carafa funded a chapel in the southern transept to be dedicated to the Virgin Mary

and to Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). From 1488 until 1493, Filippino Lippi (1457-1504), the illegitimate son of Fra Filippo Lippi and the nun Lucrezia Buti, painted a series of frescos in this chapel. These have been definitively described by Gail Geiger (1986), from whom most of the following comments derive. On the western wall of the chapel is *The Triumph of Saint Thomas Aquinas over the Heretics*:



At the top of the fresco, two putti display banners quoting *Psalms* 119:130 (118:130 in the Vulgate) guaranteeing the truth of the fresco.

Declaratio sermonum tuorum illuminat, et intellectum dat parvulis. [The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple.]

In the upper center of the fresco above the seated saint an

opened book shows the quotation from *Proverbs* 8:7 with which Aquinas opened his *Summa Contra Gentiles* also known as *Liber de veritate catholicae fidei contra errores infidelium* [The book of the truth of the Catholic faith as against the errors of the infidels.]

Veritatem meditabitur guttur meum, et labia mea detestabuntur impium. [For my mouth shall speak truth; and wickedness is an abomination to my lips.]



Thomas holds in his hands a book that quotes *I Corinthians* 1:19

Sapientiam sapientum perdam. [I will destroy the wisdom of the wise. (Paul is being ironic: he means to disprove the conclusions of those who foolishly pretend to wisdom, and replace them with the truth.)]

At his feet is an old man who is the personification of evil. He has been subdued by a banner quoting from the apocryphal

Book of Wisdom 7:30:

Sapientia vincit malitiam. [Wisdom conquers evil]

Inscribed on the plaque below the saint's throne are the words

Divo Thomae ob prastratam impietatem [To the divine Thomas for overthrowing heresy.]

Sitting beside Thomas are personifications of his knowledge and ability. On the left are Philosophy holding a book and Theology pointing heavenward. The face of Theology is illuminated with the serenity of her mystic vision. On the right are two of the liberal arts: Logic (*Dialectica*) controlling a snake as symbol of the syllogism, and Language (*Grammatica*) holding a pointer and instructing a young child.



In the distant background on the left side of the fresco is the Statue of Marcus Aurelius. At the time the fresco was painted, this statue was considered to represent the Emperor Constantine the Great, who convened the Council of Nicaea in 325CE to settle the basic tenets of the Christian faith – as expressed in the Nicene Creed. This demonstrates the establishment of Church doctrine

In the background to the right can be seen the Porta di Ripa Grande on the Tiber. The papal fleet under the direction of Cardinal Carafa had left from this port in 1472 to wage war with the Venetians against the Turks, an expedition that briefly freed the city of Smyrna. This detail indicates the ongoing defense of doctrine against the infidels.



In the lower left of the fresco, a severe character identified by Geiger (1986) as Niccoli Orsini, the general of the papal army, brings forth a group of heretics to witness the end of their heresies. The most prominent of these is the bearded Arius. He believed that God the Father preceded God the Son and that there must have been a time then when Christ was not. His heresy is shown in the downcast papers:

Si Filius natus est, erat quando non erat Filius. [If the Son was born there was a time when the son was not.]



In the lower right of the fresco, a friar in black and white, identified by Geiger (1986) as Joachim Torriani, the Master General of the Dominican order, ushers to the front another group of heretics. The first of these is Sabellius, dressed in a red Roman toga, who believed that the three parts of the Trinity were simply modes of one God. The discarded papers show his error:

Pater a Filio non est alius nec spiritu sancto [The father is not different from the Son nor from the Holy Spirit].

Did Aquinas really triumph over heresy? He certainly provided the logical underpinnings for what was considered orthodoxy. But his logic was strained. And sometimes it was completely wrong. Aquinas used Aristotle's metaphysics to explain the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation: that the substance of the bread and the wine were changed during the Eucharist into the actual body and blood of Christ. This ceremony of the Eucharist (also known as Holy Communion) derives from Christ's instructions to his disciples at the Last Supper:

And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me.

Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you. (*Luke 22: 19-20*)

Thomas Aquinas proposed that, since objects have both a “substance” (which defines what they are) and “accidents” or “appearances” (which determines how we perceive them), during the Eucharist, the substances of the bread and wine are changed even though they appear the same (Pruss, 2011). Aristotle’s ideas about substance and accidents have no basis in our modern understanding of nature. Protestants consider the Eucharist to be a symbolic ceremony: the bread and wine does not actually change to the body and blood of Christ.

Concluding Comments

When one does not have evidence for what one believes, one can gain some confidence that one is right if others believe the same way. This is the main force behind proselytism: the drive of the religious to convince others to join them in their belief. Furthermore, those that believe differently must be condemned as heretics or the confidence of the orthodox believers might falter. Religious organizations often propose that spiritual rewards – for example, forgiveness of sins and life everlasting – only come to those who believe in the orthodox doctrines. Priests who determine what is orthodox, reward the believers and excommunicate the heretics have tremendous power. Being human, they may often use this power for selfish reasons. Jesus preached compassion and forgiveness. He argued against the codification of belief and would be saddened by those who endlessly dispute about what they cannot understand, and who condemn those that choose to believe differently.

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Searching for the Dao

This post presents some ideas about the *Dào* (“Way”) as described in the *Dàodéjīng* (“Book of the Way and its Virtue”), that legend claims was composed by *Lǎozī* in the 5th Century BCE. The *Dào* cannot be explained in words. But that has never stopped anyone from writing about it.

An Incident at Hangu Pass

No one is sure of the season or even the year. It was probably at the end of the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BCE), and it would have been appropriate if it were autumn. An old man

riding on a water buffalo, together with a young servant, requested passage to the west through the frontier gate at Hangu. They were leaving the violence and corruption of the Kingdom of the Eastern Zhou, which was slowly dissolving into anarchy, a time that was later historians called the Warring States Period (475-221 BCE).

Yīnxǐ, the head guardsman, realized that the old man was of some importance. In answer to his questions, the old man confirmed that he had been the Royal Archivist at the court of Zhou. He had resigned his position, and was now on his way to the mountains to find peace. *Yīnxǐ* requested that the old man not leave without providing him with a summary of his wisdom. The scholar obliged and wrote out a summary of all that he considered important. And then he departed, never to be heard of again.

The writings that he left with *Yīnxǐ* became known as the *Dàodéjīng* – the “Book of the Way and its Virtue” (*Tao Te Ching* in the old Wade-Giles system of romanization), containing about 5000 characters in 81 brief chapters. The first section of the book (chapters 1-37) dealt with the *Dào* (“way”), and the second section with *Dé* (“virtue”). The author became known as *Lǎozī* – the “Old Master” (*Lao Tzu* in Wade-Giles). Sometimes the book itself is also referred to as *Lǎozī*.

I have told the story as best I can. There are several legends about what happened, and I am not sure which are true, or even whether *Lǎozī* was an actual person (Graham, 1998; Chan, 2000). The story does explain the nature of the book – an anthology of cryptic sayings and opinions on the nature of the universe and how people should behave.

The Eastern Zhou dynasty had its court in Chengzhou, now called Luoyáng. From there the king tried to maintain his rule over the surrounding feudal states. After many years of internecine warfare, the Qin state in the west ultimately prevailed over the others and founded the first Chinese Empire

in 221 BCE.



The frontier gate in the Hangu Pass has been preserved as the centerpiece of an archeological site in Xin'an:



Lǎozī on his water buffalo was portrayed by *Chao Buzhi* in an ink painting (around 1100 CE) now in the Palace Museum in Taipei:



A carved jade circle from the early 19th Century represents the meeting between *Lǎozī* (right) and *Yīnxǐ* (left) with the Hangu Gate at the top.



In 1938, Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) felt definite empathy for *Lǎozī*. He was living in Denmark, an exile from his home in Germany, which was descending into the horrors of Nazism. He wrote a poem *The Legend of How the Tao te Ching Came into Being on Lao Tse's Journey into Exile*, which was later published in *Tales from the Calendar* (1949, translated 1961). The custom's officer asks the boy attending on *Lǎozī* what he has learned from the old man and receives the answer

... Daß das weiche Wasser in Bewegung
Mit der Zeit den harten Stein besiegt.
[That over time the gentlest water
Defeats the hardest stone]

This paraphrases some lines from chapter 78 of the *Dàodéjīng*

Brecht ends his poem with

Aber rühmen wir nicht nur den Weisen Dessen Name auf
dem Buche prangt! Denn man muß dem Weisen seine
Weisheit erst entreißen. Darum sei der Zöllner auch
bedankt: Er hat sie ihm abverlangt.

[But we should not just praise the Sage
Whose name is displayed on the book.
Since we must retrieve from the Wise their wisdom,
The customs officer should also be thanked
For demanding it of him.]

The Nature of the *Dào*

The main focus of *Lǎozī* 's book is the *Dào* (pinyin, *Tao* in Wade-Gilles). The character is composed of the “walk/march” radical on the left (a leg taking a step forward) and the “head/chief” radical on the upper right (a head with hair or horns above a stylized face). The illustration below shows the Small Seal Script version (which would have been used at the beginning of the Qin dynasty) on the left, and the modern version on the right.



As a noun, *Dào* is most often translated as “way” or “path.” When it is used as a verb it generally means “say” or “explain.” This confluence of “way” and “word” also occurs in the Christian gospel of *John* (1:1, and 14:6), where the source

of everything is called the word (*logos*) and salvation is obtained through the way (*odos*) (Ching, 1993, p. 88).

In *Lǎozī* 's book, the *Dào* represents the underlying and enduring principle of the universe, something completely beyond human comprehension (Schwartz, 2000):

The *Dào* that can be explained is not the eternal *Dào*;
The Name that can be told is not the eternal Name.

The nameless is the source of heaven and earth,
The mother of everything which can be named.

Free from desire, you can realize its mystery;
Caught in desire, you see only its manifestations.

That these two aspects are both same and different
Is the paradox:

Mystery of mystery,
Gateway to wonder.

[Chapter 1, my translation. I am indebted to Mitchell (1988) for the opposition of “mystery” and “manifestations.” And to Pepper and Wang (2021) for their word-by-word analysis.]

Livia Kohn (2020, p 16) proposed:

One way to think of *Dào* is as two concentric circles, a smaller one in the center and a larger one on the periphery. The dense, smaller circle in the center is *Dào* at the root of creative change—tight, concentrated, intense, and ultimately unknowable, ineffable, and beyond conscious or sensory human attainment... The larger circle at the periphery is *Dào* as it appears in the world, the patterned cycle of life and visible nature. Here we can see *Dào* as it comes and goes, rises and sets, rains and shines, lightens and darkens— the everchanging yet everlasting, cyclical alteration of natural patterns, life and death... This is *Dào*

as natural transformations: the metamorphoses of insects, ways of bodily dissolution, and the inevitable entropy of life. This natural, tangible *Dào* is what people can study and learn to create harmony in the world; the cosmic, ineffable *Dào*, on the other hand, they need to open to by resting in clarity and stillness to find true authenticity in living.

Her description fits with that in Chapter 11 of the *Dàodéjīng*:

Thirty spokes converge on the wheel's hub,
The emptiness of which allows the cart to be used.

And perhaps point to Eliot's image in *Burnt Norton* (1941)

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh
nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the
dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement.

As pointed out by Kenner (1959, pp 297-8))

This is the philosophers' paradox of the Wheel, the exact center of which is precisely motionless, whatever the velocity of the rim.

Yīn and Yáng

The *Dào* is the source of all the different things in the world. The multiplicity of the world is described in Chapter 2 of the *Dàodéjīng* (translation by Ursula Le Guin, 1997):

For being and nonbeing
arise together;
hard and easy
compete with each other;
long and short

shape each other;
high and low
depend on each other;
note and voice
make music together;
before and after
follow each other.

The source of this multiplicity is proclaimed in Chapter 42
(my translation)

The *Dào* gives birth to one
One gives birth to two
Two give birth to three
Three gives birth to the myriad things of the world.

These carry *Yīn* on their back and *Yáng* in their arms
And together they achieve harmony

Yīn is water, earth, night, female; *Yáng* is fire, sky, day, male. Through much of the *Dàodéjīng*, *Lǎozī* is more partial to *Yīn*, the eternal female. *Yīn* and *Yáng* mix to form a third type of being and from this intermingling comes everything – *Wànwù* (ten thousand things). This process is depicted in the *Tàijítú* symbol: the outer circle represents the whole while the light and dark areas represent its opposing manifestations. The *Tàijítú* in turn becomes the center of the *Bāguà* (“eight symbols”) map, representing all the different elements of the world.

Name	Nature
乾 Qián	天 Sky (Heaven)
巽 Xùn	風 Wind
坎 Kǎn	水 Water
艮 Gèn	山 Mountain
坤 Kūn	地 Earth
震 Zhèn	雷 Thunder
離 Lí	火 Fire
兌 Duì	澤 Lake



The Rule of Dé

The character for *Dé* (pinyin, *Te* in Wade-Giles) contains on the left the radical for “step/road.” The upper right of the character represents “truth” – something placed on a pedestal to be examined. The lower right is the radical for “heart.” The character thus embodies the idea of following the path of the true heart. *Dé* is translated as “virtue” or “morality.” The illustration below shows the Small Seal Script version on the left and the modern version on the right.

德 德

According to *Lǎozī*, virtue is attained by behaving in harmony with the *Dào*. Exactly how one does this is not completely clear. When he wrote his book, *Lǎozī* had decided that he needed to retire from the world, and much of his thought espouses the concept of *wéiwúwéi* – “acting without acting.” He urged leaders not to interfere with the lives of their people

and not to overburden them with taxes. He urged generals to exercise restraint and patience.

Acting in harmony with the *Dào* means doing things for the good of all rather than the benefit of one. Occasionally *Lǎozī* does recommend particular virtues. The following is from Chapter 67 of the *Dàodéjīng*:

I have three treasures
that I hold and protect:
first is compassion,
second is austerity
third is reluctance to excel.

Because I am kind I can be valiant,
Because I am frugal I can be generous
Because I am humble I can be a leader.

[My translation owes much to Red Pine (2004), from whom I took the names of the treasures. Other expressions derive from Pepper and Wang (2021).]

The Religion of Dàoism

In the 2nd Century CE, *Zhāng Dàolíng* was visited by the spirit of *Lǎozī*, and proclaimed himself the first “Celestial Master” of the *Dào*. (Ching, 1993; Hendrichke, 2000, Kohn 2020; Robinet, 1992; Wong, 1997). Dàoism became an organized religion. *Lǎozī* was deified. Various other sages and believers were raised to the rank of “Immortals.” The descendants of *Zhang Dàolíng* have continued to lead the religion to the present day. Dàoism as a religion provided its adherents with rituals, prayers, scriptures, talismans, and divination. Some of the “austerity” of *Lǎozī* was perhaps lost in the proliferating ceremonies.

Dàoism was immensely popular. Temples sprang up everywhere. Dàoism was particularly attracted to the mountains, perhaps because this is where *Lǎozī* attained his immortality after

leaving through Hangu Pass. Statues of *Lǎozī* and the immortals abound. The following is a large statue of *Lǎozī* created during the Song Dynasty (960-1279). It is located in the Qingyuan Mountain Park near Quanzhou city in Southern China.



The Art of Dàoism

Much of the art associated with Dàoism concerns the activities of the Immortals (Little, 2000; Little & Eichman, 2000). However, during the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) when the Mongols controlled China and ruled an Empire that spread as far west as Europe, several artists evolved a style of landscape painting that attempted to portray the simple power of nature (Barnhart, 1983; Cahill, 1976; Scott, 2006).

Probably the most famous of these painters was *Ní Zàn* (1301-1374), an aristocrat who gave up his worldly goods and retired from public life to live as an ascetic. One of his

last paintings, now in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, is entitled *Woods and Valleys of Mount Yu* (1372).



The poem appended to the top of the painting identifies where it was created and concludes:

We watch the clouds and apply our paint;

We drink wine and write poems.
The joyous feelings of this day
Will linger long after we have parted.

The painting portrays the stillness of the water in the lake and the power of the mountains on the further shore. These seem to embody the eternal forces of *Yīn* and *Yáng*. In the foreground are a few of the ten thousand things that make up our particular world. The most powerful part of the painting is that which is not painted – the water representing the force of *Yīn*.

The spirit at the center of all is called the dark female,
Gateway of the foundations of heaven and earth,
Which lasts unbroken and forever: use it.
[*Dàodéjīng*, Chapter 6, my translation]

Final Thoughts

Most people believe that the universe is governed by rules. Many believe that such rules are purposeful and that the universe is evolving toward some goal. We are a hopeful species and we like to think of this process as benevolent rather than blind. Many of our religions urge us to fit our individual intentions to this more general goal. Of all this we are unsure. But there is something behind it all:

Something there is, whose veiled creation was
Before the earth or sky began to be;
So silent, so aloof and so alone,
It changes not, nor fails, but touches all:
Conceive it as the mother of the world.
I do not know its name;
A name for it is “Way.”
[*Dàodéjīng*, Chapter 25, Blakney (1955) translation]

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Thoughts on the Kabbalah

The Kabbalah is a body of Jewish thought based on mystical insight into the nature of God and an imaginative interpretation of the Torah. The word itself means “received.” According to legend this special knowledge was imparted by God either to Adam in Eden or to Moses on Sinai, and handed down thereafter from generation to generation to an enlightened few, who preserved the received wisdom and taught it to their students. This post presents some thoughts about the Kabbalah

from someone who, though neither Jewish nor fluent in Hebrew, is fascinated by the intricacy of its ideas.

Early Origins of the Kabbalah

Since at the beginning the Kabbalah was largely unwritten, we have no clear ideas about its origins. However, in the centuries following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, various books on the Kabbalah were written down using the Aramaic language in the region of Syria-Palestine (Dan & Kiener, 1986; Dan, 2007; Hoffman, 2010; Matt, 1996a, Ogden, 2016).

One of these foundational texts of the Kabbalah is the *Sefir Yetzirah* – the “Book of the Creation,” or “Book of Formation.” The universe was created by God engraving in light upon the darkness the 32 letters and numbers of the Hebrew language (*Sefir Yetzirah* I:1, Kaplan translation, 1990):

With 32 mystical paths of Wisdom
engraved Yah
 the Lord of Hosts
 the God of Israel
the living God
 King of the universe
El Shaddai
 Merciful and Gracious
 High and Exalted
 Dwelling in eternity
 Whose name is Holy –
 He is lofty and holy –
And He created His universe
 with three books (Sephariim),
 with text (Sopher)
 with number (Sephari)
 and with communication (Sippur).

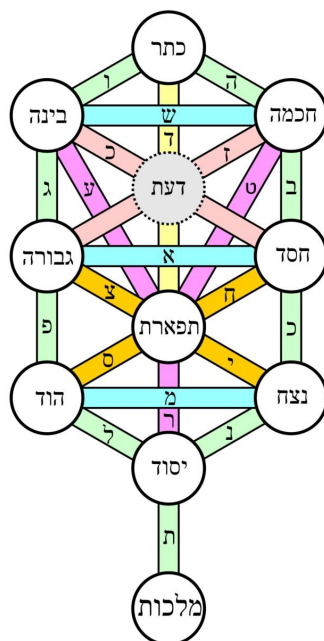
Text and number define the nature of the universe. Its

qualities are described by language, and the quantities of its components are described by number. Communication allows the universe to exist – as divine speech. Note that the Hebrew root S-F-R using the letters *samech* (s), *pay* (p/f) and *resh* (r) is the basis of many words denoting writing and books, counting and numbers.

Another text probably written in that period, the *Sefer HaBahir* – the “Book of Illumination” –associated the ten numbers with ten different ways that God was manifest in the universe that He created: the *Sefirot* (Verses 124-193, Kaplan translation, 1979). These divine emanations became a way to understand all things.

The following illustration shows the 10 *Sefirot* (singular *Sefirah*) together with 22 linkages, each denoted by one of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. As well as the 10 *Sefirot*, the idea of *Da’at* or “knowledge” is represented in the upper half of the diagram. Originally this was not directly connected to any of the *Sefirot*. Rather it appeared to be entangled in the network: knowledge develops through the study of the *Sefirot* and their interactions. Kaplan (1990, p 25) suggests that it is “the point of confluence between Wisdom and Understanding.” Other interpretations consider *Da’at* to be one of the 10 *Sefirot*, and consider *Keter* as the Divine Will that infuses the whole underlying structure of the universe.

כתר	Keter	Crown
חכמה	Chochmah	Wisdom
בינה	Binah	Understanding
דעת	Da'at	Knowledge
חסד	Chesed	Love
גבורה	Gevurah	Power
תפארת	Tiferet	Beauty
נצח	Netzach	Endurance
הוד	Hod	Splendor
יסוד	Yesod	Foundation
מלכות	Malkhut	Kingdom



א	Alef (a)	1	Ox
ב	Bet (b/v)	2	House
ג	Gimel (g)	3	Camel
ד	Dalet (d)	4	Door
ה	He (h)	5	Window
ו	Vav (v)	6	Nail
ז	Zayin (z)	7	Sword
ח	Chet (ch)	8	Fence
ט	Tet (t)	9	Serpent
י	Yod (y)	10	Hand
כ	Kaf (k)	20	Palm (hand)
ל	Lamed (l)	30	Goad
מ	Mem (m)	40	Water
נ	Nun (n)	50	Fish
ס	Samech (s)	60	Support
ע	Ayin (o)	70	Eye
פ	Pe (p/f)	80	Mouth
צ	Tsadi (ts)	90	Hook
ק	Qof (q)	100	Back of Head
ר	Resh (r)	200	Head
ש	Shin (sh/s)	300	Tooth
ת	Tav (t)	400	Cross

The Sefirot are arranged in three linked columns. The middle column represents the main flow of energy from the Creator to the Creation. The left column tends toward the female aspect of the Divine, and the right column toward its male aspect (Kaplan, 1990, p 34). However, in some formulations, *Malkhut* is also considered as the female aspect (*Shekhinah*) of *Keter*. We shall return to this idea when we examine the *Zohar*.

The numbers and letters in this representation of creation could be used in various ways – to explain the nature of things, to predict the future, to ward off disease and to exert magical control. The practice of *Gematria* (a Hebrew word likely deriving from the Greek *grammateia*, knowledge of writing) represents words by the sum of their letters according to the alphanumeric cipher given in the preceding figure. Thus, the word for father *av* can be considered as 3 – the sum of *alef* (1) and *bet* (2): Similarly, mother *em* can be considered as 41 – the sum of *alef* (1) and *mem* (40). Adding father and mother together leads to the word for child *yeled* which has a value of 44 – the sum of *yod* (10), *lamed* (30) and *dalet* (4). (I am indebted to Tokarczuk, 2022, p 579 for this example).

The use of Creation's numbers and letters in magic was the basis of *Kaballah Ma'asit* (practical), as compared to *Kaballah Iyunit* (contemplative). Amulets containing magical words were used to treat or prevent disease. The legendary Prague Golem (illustrated on the right by Philippe Semeria) was formed out of clay and brought to life by writing the Hebrew letters *alef*, *met* and *tav* upon his forehead – these make the word *emet*, "life." Once the Golem became dangerous, he was returned to clay by erasing the first of these letters so that the word became *met*, "death" (Scholem, 1965/1996, pp 158-204)



Many are the ways in which the world and its history can be mapped onto the *Sephirot*. One analysis relates these different emanations to the sayings of God as reported in the first chapter of *Genesis* (Kaplan, 1990, pp 6-7). God spoke and the universe came into being. The following are the words introduced by "And God said..." as they flow from Keter into the other nine emanations

3 Let there be light (*Chochmah*, Wisdom)

6 Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters (*Binah*, Understanding)

9 Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear (*Chesed*, Love)

11 Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind (*Gevurah*, Power)

14 Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night (*Tif'eret*, Beauty)

20 Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life, and fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven. (*Netzach*, Endurance)

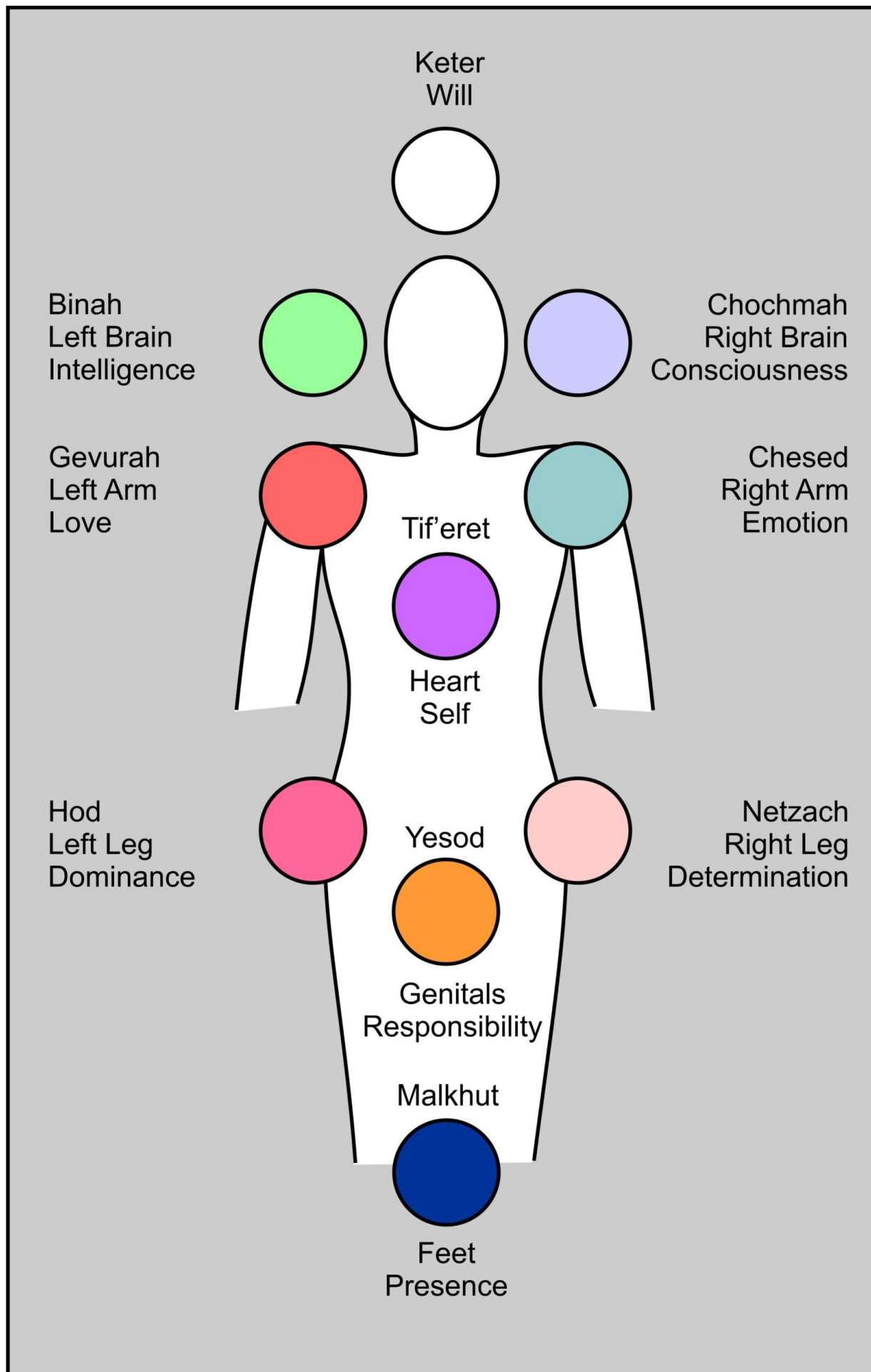
24 Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth after his kind (*Hod*, Splendor)

26 Let us make man in our image, after our likeness (*Yesod*, Foundation)

28 Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth (*Malkhut*, Kingdom)

Likewise, each of the ten commandments as given in Exodus 20 may relate to a particular *Sefirah* (Bar-Asher, 2022). However, exactly which commandment goes with which *Sefirah* varies from one commentary to the next. Most accept that the first commandment ("I am the Lord thy God ... Thou shalt have no other gods before me") relates to *Keter*.

The ten *Sefirot* can be mapped to the primordial human body in many ways. The following illustration shows an amalgam of several (Kaplan, 1990, p. 151; Berenson-Perkins, 2000; Atzmon, 2003). These relations are in keeping with the idea that "God created man in his own image" (*Genesis* 1:27).



Little definite is known about the history of Kabbalah scholarship between these early origins in Palestine and the 13th Century in Provence, France, where Rabbi Isaac the Blind (about 1160-1235 CE) wrote a commentary on the *Sefer Yetzirah* (Scholem, 1987, Dan & Kiener, 1986; Dan, 2007). He and his colleagues were the first to organize the 10 *Sefirot* in the way (see preceding figure) in which they are now most commonly considered (Dan & Kiener, 1986, pp 32, 73-86). He described the *Sefirot* as the emanations of a boundless God – *Ein Sof*, words meaning “no limit” and denoting that which is both infinite in space and eternal in time (Valabregue-Parry, 2012). *Ein Sof* is everything but is also nothing because it is not anything in particular. The concept of *Ein Sof* is therefore related to the idea of *Ayin* or “nothingness” (Matt, 1990). The words *Ein* and *Ayin* use the same Hebrew letters. *Ayin* and *Ein Sof* work through the first *Sephirah* – *Keter* – to create the other *Sefirot*.

The study of the Kabbalah then spread from Southern France to the Jewish communities in Spain. In Gerona, Rabbi Azriel (about 1160-1238 CE), who had studied with Rabbi Isaac the Blind, wrote

Anything visible, and anything that can be grasped by thought, is bounded. Anything bounded is finite. Anything finite is not undifferentiated. Conversely, the boundless is called *Ein Sof*, Infinite. It is absolute undifferentiation in perfect, changeless oneness. Since it is boundless, there is nothing outside of it. Since it transcends and conceals itself, it is the essence of everything hidden and revealed. Since it is concealed, it is the root of faith and the root of rebellion. As it is written, “One who is righteous lives by his faith.” The philosophers acknowledge that we comprehend it only by way of no.

Emanating from *Ein Sof* are the ten *sefirot*. They constitute the process by which all things come into being and pass away. They energize every existent thing that can be

quantified. Since all things come into being by means of the sefirot, they differ from one another; yet they all derive from one root. Everything is from *Ein Sof*; there is nothing outside of it. (quotation from Matt, 1996a, p. 29)

The Spanish Rabbi Josef Gikatilla (about 1248-1305), whose name comes from the Spanish *Chiquitilla* (little one) wrote in his *Sha'are Orah* ("The Gates of Light," translated by Weinstein, 1994):

The depth of primordial being is called Boundless (*Ein Sof*). Because of its concealment from all creatures above and below, it is also called Nothingness (*Ayin*). If one asks, "What is it?" the answer is, "Nothing," meaning: No one can understand anything about it. It is negated of every conception. No one can know anything about it—except the belief that it exists. Its existence cannot be grasped by anyone other than it. Therefore its name is "I am becoming."

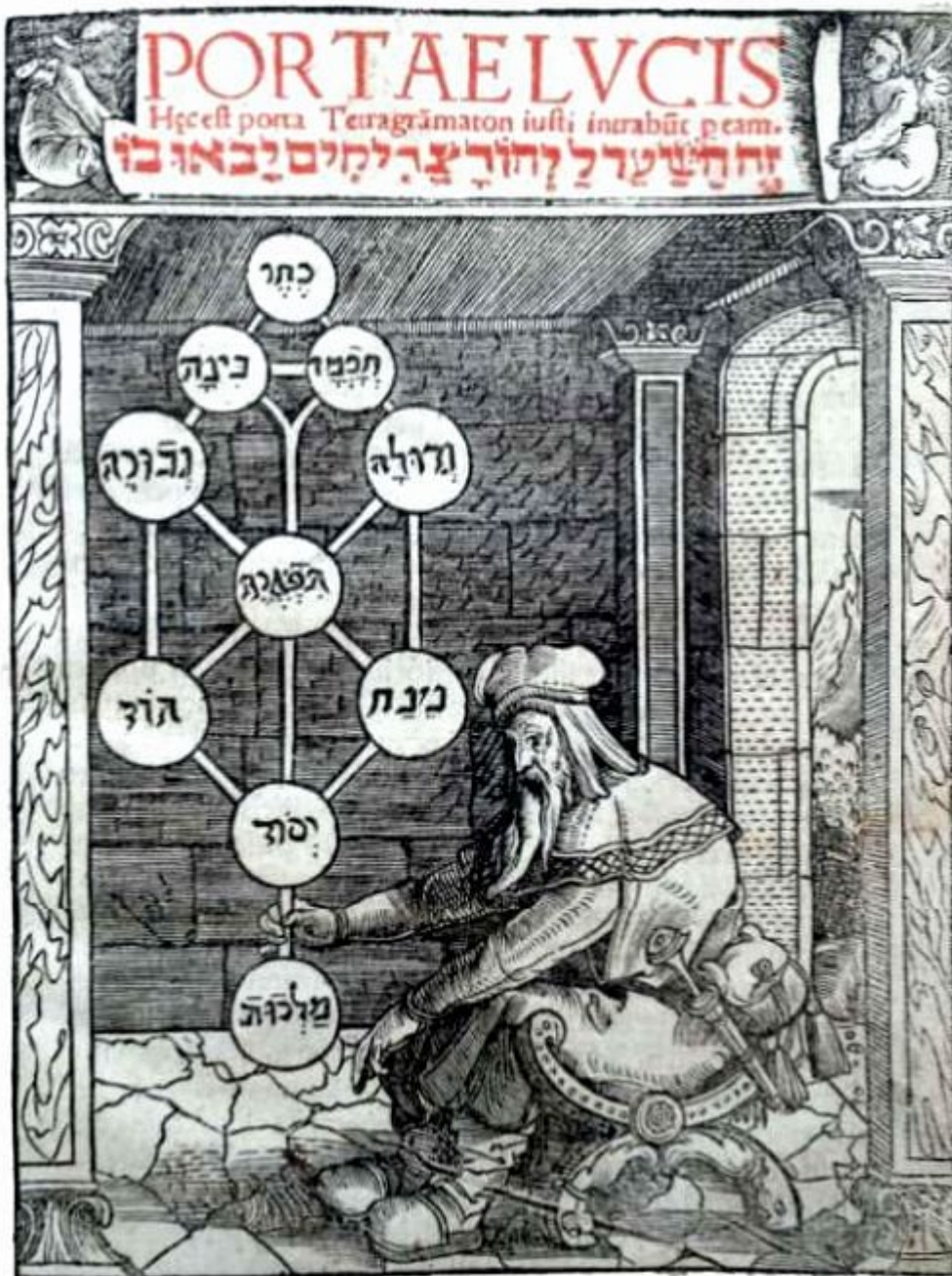
The final comment refers to the name "I am that I am" – *Eheyeh asher eheyeh* – of God in the burning bush in Exodus 3:14. Since Hebrew does not clearly indicate the tense of the verb, this can also be translated as "I am who I shall be" or "I shall be who I am."

In the *Sha'are Orah*, Gikatilla related the ten Sefirot to the various names of God in the Torah (this table derives from the Wikipedia article on Gikatilla):

SEPHIROT AND THE NAMES OF GOD

Sephirah	Holy Name
כתר, <i>Keter</i> , "Crown"	אהי"ה, <i>Eheye</i> , "I AM"
חכמה, <i>Chokhmah</i> , "Wisdom"	יה, <i>Yah</i> , "LORD"
בינה, <i>Binah</i> , "Understanding"	יהו"ה, <i>Havayah</i> , "LORD"
חסד, <i>Chesed</i> , "Kindness"	אל, <i>El</i> , "God"
גבורה, <i>Gevurah</i> , "Severity"	אלהים, <i>Elohim</i> , "God"
תפארת, <i>Tiferet</i> , "Beauty"	יהו"ה, <i>Havayah</i> , "LORD"
נצח, <i>Netzach</i> , "Eternity"	יהו"ה צבאות, <i>Havayah Tsevaot</i> , "LORD of hosts"
הוד, <i>Hod</i> , "Splendor"	אלהים צבאות, <i>Elohim Tsevaot</i> , "God of hosts"
יסוד, <i>Yesod</i> , "Foundation"	אל חי, <i>El Chai</i> , "the living God"
מלכות, <i>Malkuth</i> , "Kingship"	אדוני, <i>Adonai</i> , "my Lord"

The illustration below shows the frontispiece of a Latin translation of the *Sha'are Orach* (*Portae Lucis*) by Paulus Ricius, published in Augsburg in 1516, from the collection of the British Museum. The engraving shows a Kabbalist meditating on the *Sefirot*.



Mystic meditation on the ten Sefirot allows one to gain access to the nothingness of *Ein Sof*. Matt (1996a, p 119) quotes an anonymous Kabbalist from 13th Century Gerona:

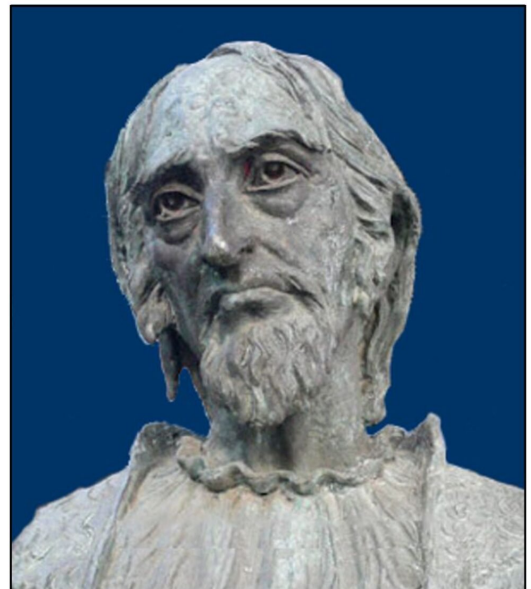
When the soul comes into the One, entering into pure loss of self, it finds God as in nothingness. It seemed to a man that he had a dream, a waking dream, that he became pregnant with nothingness as a woman with child. In this nothingness God was born. He was the fruit of nothingness; God was born in nothingness. (quoted in McGinn, 1981).

The Zohar

Toward the end of the 13th Century, Moses de León (1240-1305), a Kabbalah scholar in Guadalajara, began to publish a set of Aramaic writings that he claimed had been written by the great Hebrew sage Shimon bar Yochai (also known as Rashbi) in the 2nd Century C.E. Rabbi Shimon is buried in Meron, Galilee, the sight of an annual ecstatic gathering of his adherents. The collection of these texts came to be known as the *Sefer ha-Zohar* (Book of Radiance), or more simply the *Zohar*. The legend has that Rashbi withdrew to a cave for 13 years and there, under the inspiration of the prophet Elijah, wrote the *Zohar*. Various lines of evidence suggest, however, that these texts were actually written by Moses de León, and that the *Zohar* is an example of religious *pseudoepigrapha*, works falsely attributed to a past author:

The quest for truth knows of adventures that are all its own, and in a vast number of cases has arrayed itself in pseudoepigraphic garb. the further a man progresses along his own road in this quest for truth, the more he might become convinced that his own road must have been trodden by others, ages before him. to the streak of adventurousness which was in moses de leon, no less than to his genius, we owe one of the most remarkable works of jewish literature. (Scholem, 1945/1995, p 204)

We have no contemporary portrait of Moses de León. The following illustration shows two modern representations: on the left a print by Arnold Belkin and on the right a bust by Luis Sanguino:



The following is the Zohar's commentary on the first verse of *Genesis*. I have used Matt's 2004 translation but I have in some places used the explanatory annotations in Matt (2002, 2004) instead of the literal translation:

On the authority of the King (i.e., *Ein Sof*), He engraved engravings in luster on high. A spark of impenetrable darkness flashed within the concealed of the concealed (i.e., the first and most hidden *Sefirah*, *Keter*) from the head of *Ein Sof* – a cluster of vapor forming in formlessness, thrust in a ring, not white, not black, not red, not green, no color at all. As a measuring line, yielding radiant colors. Deep within the spark gushed a flow, splaying colors below, concealed within the concealed of the mystery of *Ein Sof*. It split and did not split its aura, was not known at all, until under the impact of splitting, a single, concealed, supernal point shone. Beyond that point, nothing is known, so it is called *Reshit* (Beginning), first command of all.

The enlightened will shine like the Zohar (radiance, brilliance, splendor) of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever (Daniel 12: 3)

Zohar! Concealed of concealed struck its aura, which touched and did not touch this point. Then this beginning expanded, building itself a palace worthy of glorious praise. There it sowed seed to give birth, availing worlds. The secret is: Her stock is seed of holiness (*Hokhmah*) (Isaiah 6:13). Zohar! Sowing seed for its glory, like the seed of fine purple silk wrapping itself within, weaving itself a palace, constituting its praise, availing all.

With this beginning, the unknown concealed one created the palace. this palace is called *elohim*, god. the secret is: *Be-reshit bara Elohim*, With beginning, ____ created God.

The final lines in this section propose a complete re-interpretation of Creation. Rather than the usual translation ("In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth"), the new interpretation proposes that God is created (together with the heaven and the earth) by the unknowable and unnameable force of *Ein Sof*. The Zohar proposes that since *Elohim* follows the verb *bara*, it is the object rather than the subject of the act of creation. This would fit with modern colloquial Hebrew, although there are many examples in the Hebrew of the Torah where the subject follows the verb, e.g. Genesis 1:4, *Wayyar Elohim et-ha'owr*, God saw the light.

Some scholars have remarked about how the expansion of the universe from a "single concealed supernal point" at the beginning of Creation might represent the Big Bang (Friedman, 1995; Matt, 1996b). we should be very cautious in relating science to scripture. Early Kabbalah ideas related the ten *sefirot* to the now obsolete idea that the earth is the centre of a universe surrounded by the sky and eight crystalline spheres carrying the moon, sun, the five known planets, the fixed stars, and the empyrean heaven (Chajes, 2020).

The *Zohar* (Matt, 2004, sections i: 53ab) makes some intriguing comments on the sin of Adam and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. The tenth *Sefirah* is called *Malkhut*

(kingdom) and represents the actual world which contains both good and evil. However, the Sefirah also represents *Shekhinah*. This word means “dwelling,” or “presence,” and as such it has come to mean the presence of God within the real world. At another level of interpretation, *Shekhinah* is the female counterpart of *Keter* or the bride of *Tif’eret*. Adam’s eating of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil brought evil and death into the world and distanced *Shekhinah* from the other *Sefirot*. It was not that God drove Adam out of Eden, but that Adam drove *Shekhinah* out of God. The goal of Judaism is then to repair this cleavage between the Creator and his Creation, to join male and female back together. These concepts were to be expanded in the teachings of Isaac Luria, which will be considered later.

Christian Kabbalah

In the 15th and early 16th centuries, Renaissance scholars began once again to study scientific, philosophical and religious works written by the Ancients but long unread by teachers only concerned with Christian Scripture. Early Kabbalah writings such as the *Sefir Yetzirah* were some of the sources of knowledge that were thus “reborn” during the Renaissance. Placing these ancient Hebrew writings in the context of Christian philosophy led to the formulation of a Christian Kaballah (Forshaw, 2016).

Johann Reuchlin (1455-1522) in Germany published *De Arte Cabbalistica* in 1517. He tried to reconcile some of the ideas of the Kabbalah with Christian theology, and mapped the Christian Trinity to the upper levels of the *Sefirot*. The early 16th Century saw the beginning of a campaign to facilitate the conversion of the Jews in the Holy Roman Empire by burning all their books. Reuchlin successfully argued against this (Price, 2011).

The other famous Renaissance scholar of the Kabbalah was

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) (Copenhaver, 2019, 2020; Howlett, 2021; Hanegraaff, 2012, pp 53-68). This young nobleman studied at the universities of Ferrara, Padua and Paris, becoming proficient in French, Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic. He then became a member of the Medici court of Lorenzo the Magnificent in Florence. His beautiful face and long chestnut hair was widely depicted in renaissance art. The illustration below shows him represented (posthumously) in Raphael's *School of Athens* (1511) in the Vatican (upper left), in Cosimo Rosselli's fresco *Miracle of the Sacrament* (1486) (lower left), and holding a medallion of Cosimo de' Medici in an anonymous engraving (right).



In 1486 Pico published a set of 900 *Conclusiones philosophicae, cabalasticae et theologicae* in Rome, and offered to defend these propositions in debate with any scholar who wished to challenge them. He also published a general defense of his conclusions in his *oration on the dignity of man*, which became the foundational text of the new humanism, wherein man became the measure of all things:

For, raised to the most eminent height of theology, whence we shall be able to measure with the rod of indivisible eternity all things that are and that have been. (Caponigri translation, p 27).

Many of Pico's *Conclusions* derived from his readings in the Kabbalah. The following are three examples (from Copenhaver, 2019, Appendix C):

Ein Sof is not to be numbered along with other Numerations (*Sefira*) because it is the unity of those Numerations, removed and uncommunicated, not a coordinated unity.

Someone with a deep knowledge of Kabbalah can understand that the three great fourfold names of God contained in the secrets of Kabbalists ought to be assigned to the three persons of the Trinity by a wondrous allocation so that the name אהיה (*Ehyeh*, I am) belongs to the Father, the name יהוה (the tetragrammaton, *Yahweh*) to the Son, the name אדנאי (*Adonai*) to the Holy Spirit.

One who has thought deeply about the novenary number of beatitudes that Matthew writes about in the Gospel (*Matthew* 5: 3:12) will see that they fit wonderfully with the novenary of nine Numerations (*Sefirot*) that come beneath the first, which is the unapproachable abyss of the Deity.

Pope Innocent VII considered many of Pico's proposals, particularly those related to the Kabbalah, as heretical. He forbade the proposed debate and banned any subsequent publication of the *Conclusions*.

Pico treated all his different sources – Greek philosophers, Christian theologians, Egyptian magicians and Hebrew sages – as equal. His was a philosophy of “syncretism” (from the Greek *syn* together and *krasis* mix). The Christian Kabbalah thenceforth became part of a tradition of secret knowledge, a strange amalgam of Gnosticism, Hermetism, Alchemy, Astrology, Freemasonry, and Kabbalah. The word “cabal” entered the lexicon to denote a secret society conspiring to bring about political change by means of intrigue.

Hanegraaff (2012) characterized those systems of knowledge that are rejected by the majority yet followed by a secret few as “esotericism” – the “academy’s dustbin of rejected knowledge” (Hanegraaff, 2013, p 13). The popularity of such esoteric systems waxes and wanes. In the late 19th and early 20th Century various aspects of the occult – spiritualism, Tarot, theosophy – became popular. Later in the 20th Century various “New Age” religions made their impact.

Safed

In 1492 the Jews were expelled from Spain and the great flowering of Spanish Kabbalah ceased. Kabbalah scholars moved to other regions of Europe and the Middle East. The city of Safed in Galilee, then part of Ottoman Syria, soon became an important center of Kabbalah learning. Moses ben Jacob Cordovero (1522-1570), also known as Remak, was one of the most important scholars in Safed. His name indicates that his family originally came from Cordoba in Spain. The following is from Cordovero’s *Pardes Rimonim*, “Orchard of Pomegranates” (1548):

In the beginning *Ein Sof* emanated ten *sefirot*, which are of its essence, united with it. It and they are entirely one. There is no change or division in the emanator that would

justify saying it is divided into parts in these various sefirot. ... Imagine a ray of sunlight shining through a stained-glass window of ten different colors. The sunlight possesses no color at all but appears to change hue as it passes through the different colors of glass. Colored light radiates through the window. The light has not essentially changed, though so it seems to the viewer. Just so with the *sefirot*. The light that clothes itself in the vessels of the sefirot is the essence, like the ray of sunlight. That essence does not change color at all, neither judgment nor compassion, neither right nor left. Yet by emanating through the *sefirot*—the variegated stained glass—judgment or compassion prevails. (quoted in Matt, 1996a, p 38).

Cordovero was followed by Isaac ben Solomon Luria (1532-1572), also known as *HaARI*, “the lion.” He did not leave any writings of his own, but his teachings were later recorded by his disciples. He proposed that during Creation *Ein Sof* initially contracted (*tsimtsum*) so as to make space for the universe, and that when light was emanated into the *Sefirot* there was some unavoidable fragmentation (*shevirah*). The task of the faithful is to repair (*tikkun*) what was broken by means of good works, charity, social justice and prayer (Drob, 2000, pp 384-433). Matt (1996a, p 15) summarized these concepts:

Luria taught that the first divine act was not emanation, but withdrawal. *Ein Sof* withdrew its presence “from itself to itself,” withdrawing in all directions away from one point at the center” of its infinity, as it were, thereby creating a vacuum. This vacuum served as the site of creation. . . . Into the vacuum *Ein Sof* emanated a ray of light, channeled through vessels. At first, everything went smoothly; but as the emanation proceeded, some of the vessels could not withstand the power of the light, and they shattered. Most of the light returned to its infinite source, but the rest fell as sparks, along with the shards of the vessels. Eventually, these sparks became trapped in

material existence. The human task is to liberate, or raise, these sparks, to restore them to divinity. This process of *tikkun* (repair or mending) is accomplished through living a life of holiness. All human actions either promote or impede *tikkun*, thus hastening or delaying the arrival of the Messiah.

Final Thoughts

There is much that is foolish in the teachings of the Kaballah. The use of the Kaballah in magic makes for wonderful stories but in reality is nonsense. The use of the Kaballah to predict the future is foolish. Sabattai Zevi (1626-1676) used the Kabbalah to claim that he was the Messiah. After gathering together thousands of followers, he was imprisoned by Sultan Mehmed IV and ultimately converted to Islam. He augmented rather than decreased the sum of human suffering.

The great Kaballah texts are magnificent works of the imagination. They present a view of a universe infused with number and language. In the general sense that we cannot understand or control anything without number and language, these teachings are true. The writings of the Kaballah also provide meditative tools to facilitate individual mystical encounters with the infinite.

Over the past century we have come to consider particular things as dependent on universal principles. Noam Chomsky has shown that different human languages are all related to a universal grammar; Claude Lévi-Strauss has proposed that different human societies all follow some basic rules for how human beings interact with each other. Perhaps the ideas of the Kaballah can provide us with a general structure with which to understand things – a template for the infinite. These issues are well discussed (though ultimately not resolved) in Levi's 2009 paper "Structuralism and Kabbalah:

Sciences of mysticism or mystifications of science?"

Structural anthropology and Kabbalah, although on cursory appraisal having nothing in common—insofar as they stem from entirely different intellectual domains, the one being a modern social science and the other an ancient form of Jewish mysticism—on deeper examination actually share a number of epistemological and ontological postulates. These include, but are not limited to, the idea that surface diversity conceals an underlying unity, specifically truth is discoverable within a layered model of reality, and that space, time, and matter are characterized by entropy and fragmentation.

Perhaps we might end this post with the concept of *tikkun olam* ("repair of the world") as proposed in the Kabbalah teachings of Isaac Luria. This is one of the most powerful justifications of human ethics: we should be good not to benefit ourselves but to make the world a better place.

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Marcus Aurelius

Marcus Aurelius (121-180 CE) is one of the most famous of the Roman Emperors. Some of his renown is related to the many representations of the Emperor that have persisted to the present day: the Aurelian Column documenting the Marcomannic Wars he waged on the Northern frontiers of the Empire; the bas-reliefs that were initially mounted on a triumphal arch in Rome, and later preserved when the arch was destroyed; and the equestrian statue that, from the Renaissance, was displayed in Rome's Piazza de Campidoglio on a pedestal designed by Michelangelo. Most of Marcus' fame, however, derives from the book that he wrote during the many years when he campaigned against the Germanic Tribes who threatened to cross the Danube and invade the Empire. This book, which has come to be known as the *Meditations*, presents a philosophy that derives from Greek Stoicism: to live each day as if it were one's last, to act in accord with nature, not to become upset by whatever happens, and to help others as best one can.

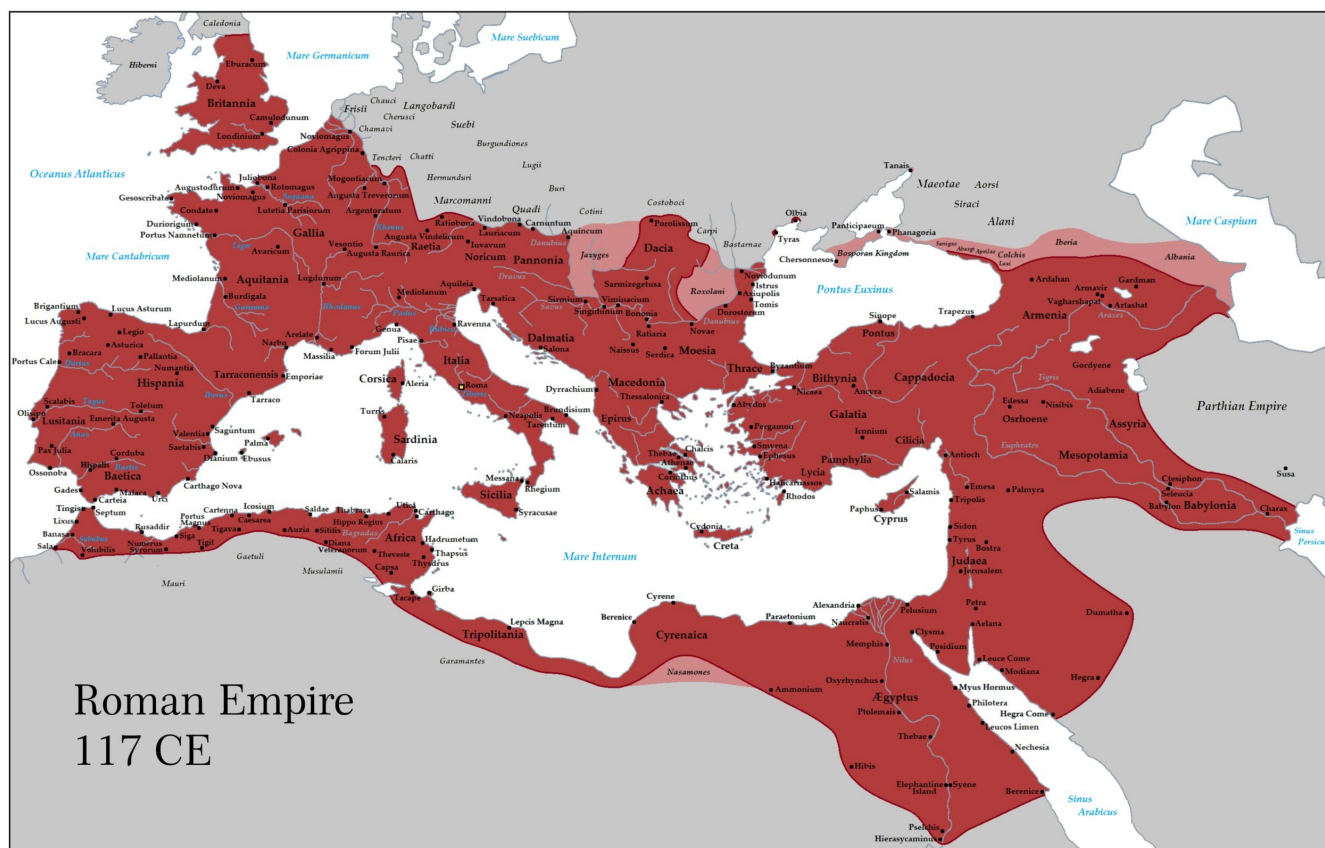
The Life of Marcus Aurelius

Marcus was born in 121CE, the son of Emperor Hadrian's nephew. After his father's death in 124 CE, Marcus was adopted by his grandfather Marcus Annius Verus.

Marcus was educated by a series of prominent tutors, whom he thanks in the first section of the *Meditations*. From Diognetus, he learned "about not getting carried away by empty enthusiasm;" from Rusticus "understanding the importance of correction and treatment of one's character;" from Apollonius "self-reliance and indisputable immunity to the dice-rolls of fortune;" from Sextus "the true meaning of living in accord with nature;" and from Fronto "understanding the nature of despotic malice and hypocrisy."

In 138 CE Marcus was adopted by his uncle, the Emperor Antoninus Pius, as his heir, and assumed the name Marcus Aurelius ("golden") Antoninus. From his adoptive father, he learned "calmness and an unshakeable adherence to deliberately made decisions" (this and preceding quotations from the Waterfield translation, 2021). In 145 CE Marcus married Faustina, the daughter of Antoninus.

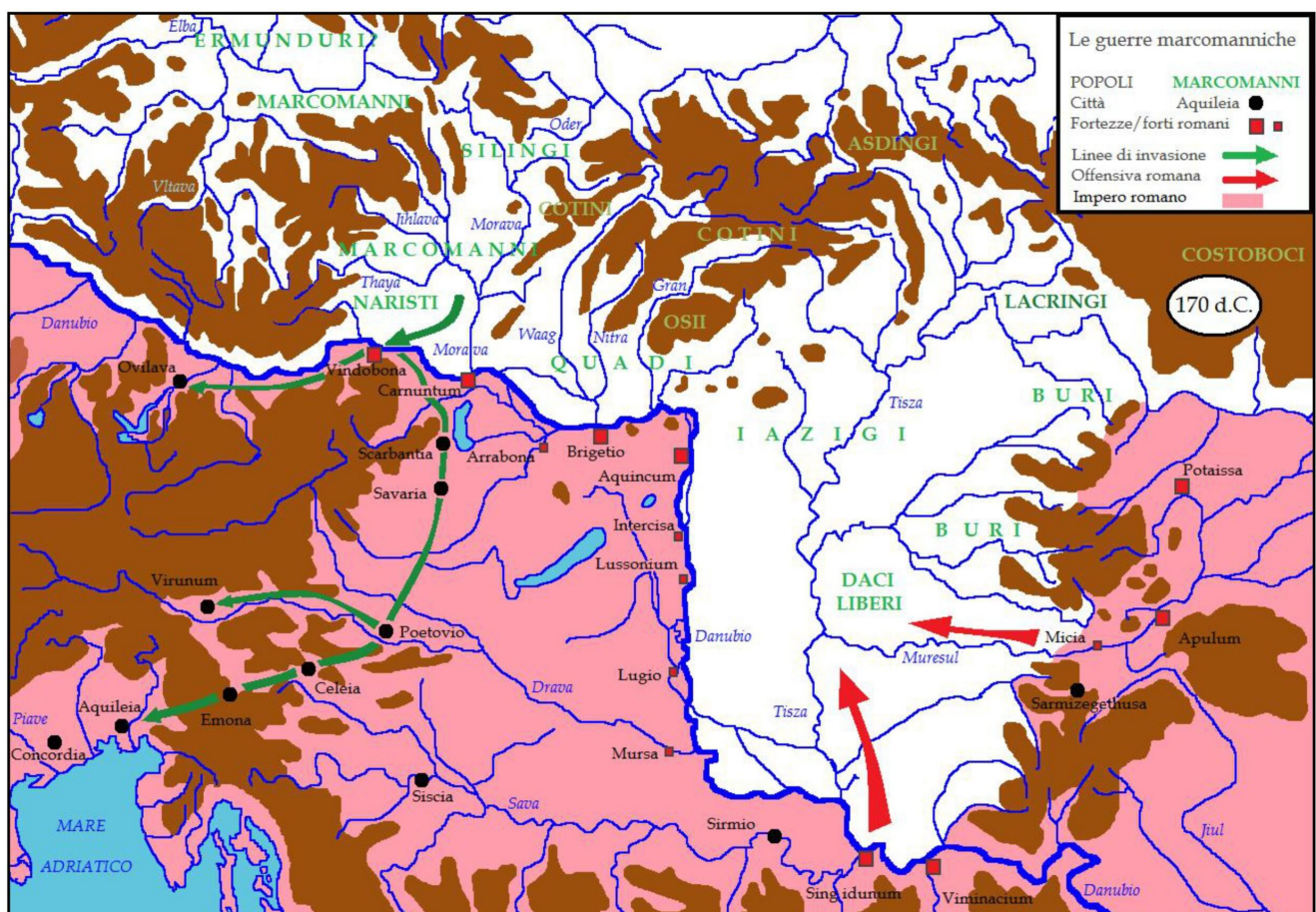
With the death of Antoninus Pius in 161 CE, Marcus became joint Emperor with Lucius Verus, whom Antoninus had also adopted. Together they assumed rule over the huge Roman Empire, which, since the days of the Emperor Trajan (53 -117 CE), extended from Portugal in the West to Syria in the East, and from Britain in the North to North Africa in the South:



At the accession of Marcus and Lucius, the empire was in turmoil. Rebellions were breaking out in Britain, and the Germanic tribes were harassing the Empire's frontier on the Danube. Most importantly, the Parthian king, Vologases III, had invaded the Eastern province of Armenia, and threatened to enter Syria. Marcus dispatched generals to Britain and the Danube, and Lucius led an army against the Parthians. The Northern troubles were quickly subdued, and after some initial defeats, the Roman legions finally repulsed the Parthians and invaded Mesopotamia. By 165 CE the empire was once again secure. Lucius returned home to Rome, and Avidius Cassius, one of the most successful of the Roman generals in the East, was made governor of Syria.

However, soldiers returning from the Eastern wars brought with them the Antonine Plague which spread throughout the Roman Empire from 165 to 180 CE, killing about 10% of the population. No one is absolutely sure of the nature of the disease. Most believe that it was a virulent strain of smallpox (*Variola*).

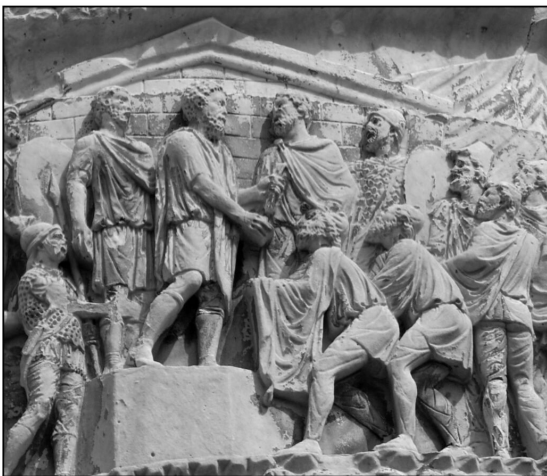
In 166 CE the Marcomanni (derived from proto-Germanic “men of the border”) crossed the Danube and invaded the province of Pannonia (present-day Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and Hungary) – see map below. Marcus and Lucius led the Roman legions against the invaders, but the Marcomannic Wars dragged on until Marcus’ death. In 168 CE, Lucius Verus succumbed to the Antonine Plague on the way home from one of the Northern campaigns, leaving Marcus as sole Emperor.



In 175 CE Avidius Cassius, by then the Supreme Commander in the East, having been misinformed that Marcus Aurelius was near death, declared himself Emperor. Marcus Aurelius and the Roman Senate planned an expedition to the East to put down the usurper. However, there was no need. One of Cassius’ centurions murdered him, and sent his head to Rome. Marcus refused to see it and had it properly buried.

For the last decade of his life, Marcus was primarily involved

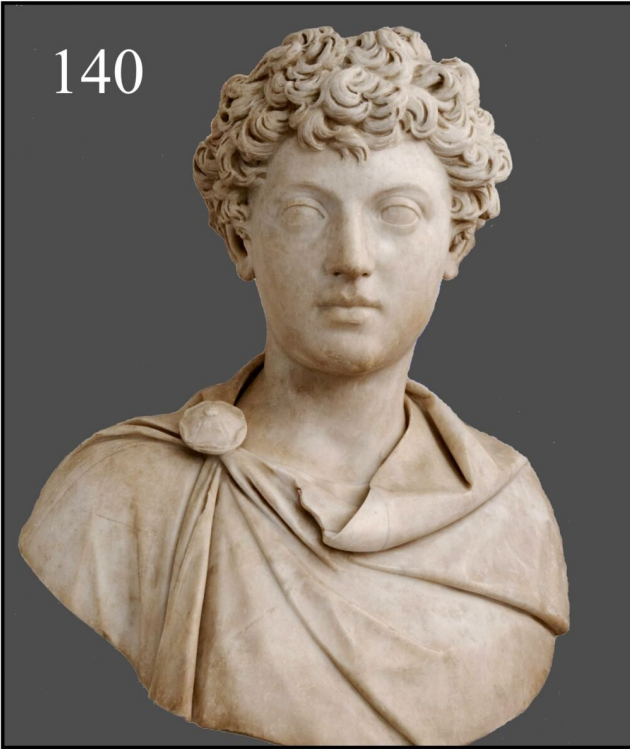
in the Marcomannic Wars. He spent little time in Rome, apparently preferring the rigor and solitude of the campaigns to the pleasures of the capital. Slowly, he brought peace to the Empire's Northern frontier. The Aurelian Column in Rome (planned in the late 170s and finally constructed just after Marcus' death) portrays various episodes from the wars (Beckmann 2011). The scenes illustrated below show (in counter-clockwise order from the lower left): the legions crossing the Danube River on a bridge of boats; the "Rain Miracle" when the surrounded Roman soldiers, lacking food and water, were rescued by a tremendous downpour represented by the Rain God; the siege of a Barbarian fort using the *testudo* (turtle), wherein the Roman soldiers attacked under cover of their interlocked shields; and Marcus (at the center, perhaps with his son Commodus on the left and a Roman General on the right) accepting the surrender of two Barbarian chieftains, one of whom who offers the Emperor his mantle.



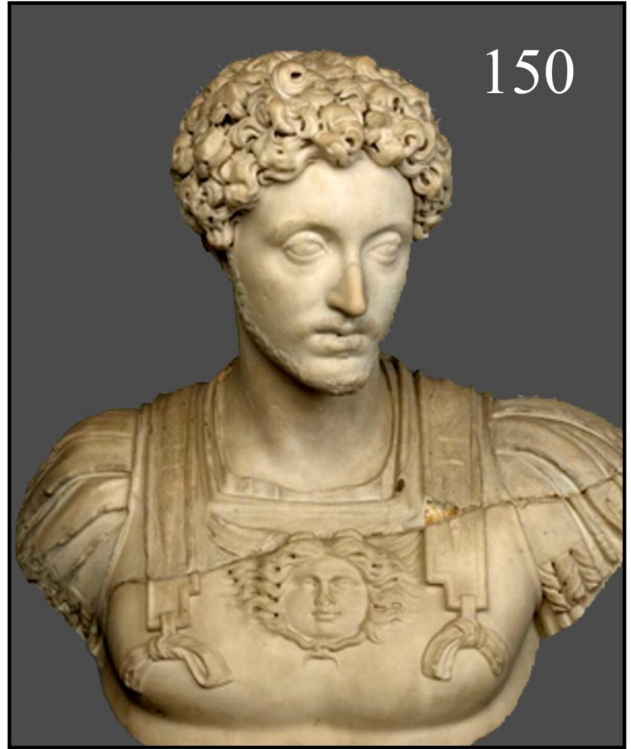
Marcus died in 180 CE in Sirmium, (presently Sremska Mitrovica in Serbia) a Roman settlement about 25 km south of the Danube. Sirmium was later to become a major capital in the Eastern Empire, but at the time of Marcus' death it was likely only a small fortified settlement. Marcus had been spitting up blood, and may have suffered from tuberculosis. It is also possible that he was another victim of the Antonine Plague. Some rumors suggested that his doctors had hastened his death in order to curry favor with his son and heir, Commodus, but there is no clear evidence for this.

Many portrait busts were made of Marcus Aurelius (Boschung 2012a). Below are a selection of these busts with approximate dates. The upper busts are from the Capitoline Museum in Rome and Farnborough Hall in Warwickshire, UK; the lower busts are from the British Museum and from the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

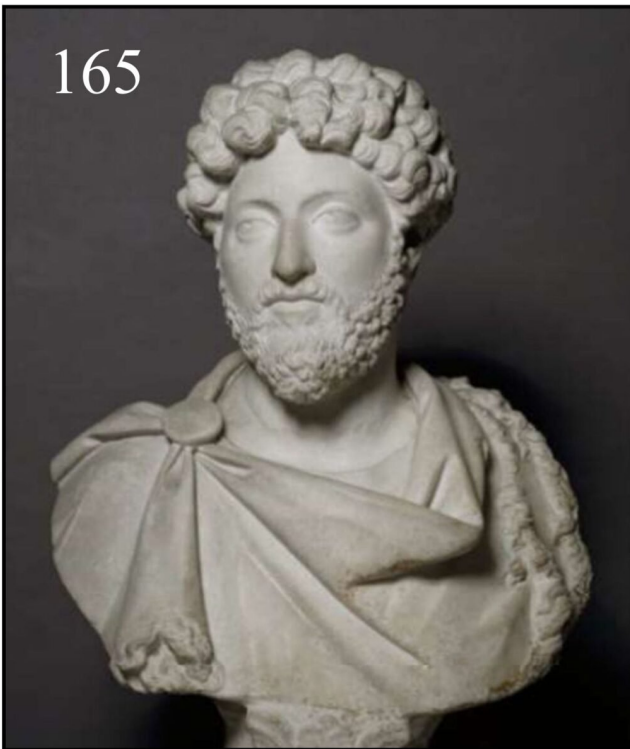
140



150



165



170



The reign of Commodus, the son and successor of Marcus Aurelius, marked the end of the greatest years of the Roman Empire. In his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), Gibbon describes the 84 years between the death of Domitian in 96 to the death of Marcus in 180 CE as the time when the Roman Empire truly flourished. The Emperors of this

time (Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius – often considered the “Good Emperors,” a term originating with Machiavelli) tempered their power with virtue. However, this could not last when all that stopped an Emperor from abusing his absolute power was his own sense of what was good:

The labors of these monarchs were overpaid by the immense reward that inseparably waited on their success; by the honest pride of virtue, and by the exquisite delight of beholding the general happiness of which they were the authors. A just but melancholy reflection imbittered, however, the noblest of human enjoyments. They must often have recollected the instability of a happiness which depended on the character of single man. The fatal moment was perhaps approaching, when some licentious youth, or some jealous tyrant, would abuse, to the destruction, that absolute power, which they had exerted for the benefit of their people. The ideal restraints of the senate and the laws might serve to display the virtues, but could never correct the vices, of the emperor. The military force was a blind and irresistible instrument of oppression; and the corruption of Roman manners would always supply flatterers eager to applaud, and ministers prepared to serve, the fear or the avarice, the lust or the cruelty, of their master. (Gibbon, 1776, Chapter III)

Commodus was just such a cruel master.

The Arch of Triumph



Towards the end of the reign of Marcus Aurelius, a monumental arch was erected in Rome to commemorate his triumph over the Barbarians (Boschung, 2012b). No one is sure where the arch was constructed or when it was taken down. Of the eleven known bas-reliefs on the arch, eight were re-used on the Arch of Constantine which was built in 315 CE. Three other reliefs are now in the Capitoline Museum in Rome. One of these (on the right) shows Marcus offering mercy to the conquered Barbarians. The other two (below) show Marcus in his triumphal chariot with a Nike of Victory on his shoulders, and Marcus making a sacrifice to the Gods in gratitude for his success.



The Equestrian Statue

The equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius was likely cast at about the same time as the monumental arch (Stewart, 2012). The statue is made of gilded bronze, as befits the name "Aurelius." Its survival through the late Roman years and medieval period has been attributed to its being mistakenly considered a representation of Constantine the Great (272-337 CE), the Emperor who made Christianity the religion of the Empire.



Joseph Brodsky provided a marvelous description of the statue in his *Homage to Marcus Aurelius* (1995):

The Romans, superstitious like all Italians, maintain that when the bronze Marcus hits the ground, the end of the world will occur. Whatever the origin of this superstition, it stands to reason if one bears in mind that Marcus' motto was Equanimity. The word suggests balance, composure under pressure, evenness of mental disposition; literally: equation of the animus, i.e., keeping the soul—and thus the world—in check. Give this formula of the Stoic posture a possible mis-spelling and you'll get the monument's definition: Equinimity. The horseman tilts, though, somewhat, as if leaning toward his subjects, and his hand is stretched out in a gesture that is a cross between a greeting and a blessing. So much so that for a while some insisted that this was not Marcus Aurelius but Constantine, who converted Rome to Christianity. For that, however, the horseman's face is too serene, too free of zeal or ardor, too uninvolved. It is the face of detachment, not of love—and detachment is precisely what Christianity never could manage. No, this is no Constantine, and no Christian. The face is devoid of any sentiment; it is a postscript to passions, and the lowered corners of the mouth bespeak the lack of illusion. Had there been a smile, you could think perhaps of the Buddha; but the Stoics knew too much about physics to toy with the finality of human existence in any fashion. The face shines with the bronze's original gold, but the hair and the beard have oxidized and turned green, the way one turns gray. All thought aspires to the condition of metal; and the bronze denies you any entry, including interpretation or touch. What you've got here, then, is detachment per se. And out of this detachment the Emperor leans toward you slightly, extending his right hand either to greet you or to bless you—which is to say, acknowledge your presence. For where he is, there is no you, and vice versa. The left hand theoretically holds the reins, which

are either missing now or were never there in the first place: a horse would obey this rider no matter what. Especially it it represented Nature. For he represents Reason.

Brodsky notes that the fact that Marcus Aurelius has been so long remembered on horseback plays counterpoint to what the Emperor wrote about the transience of life, and quotes his own translation of Book VII Chapter 23 of *The Meditations*.

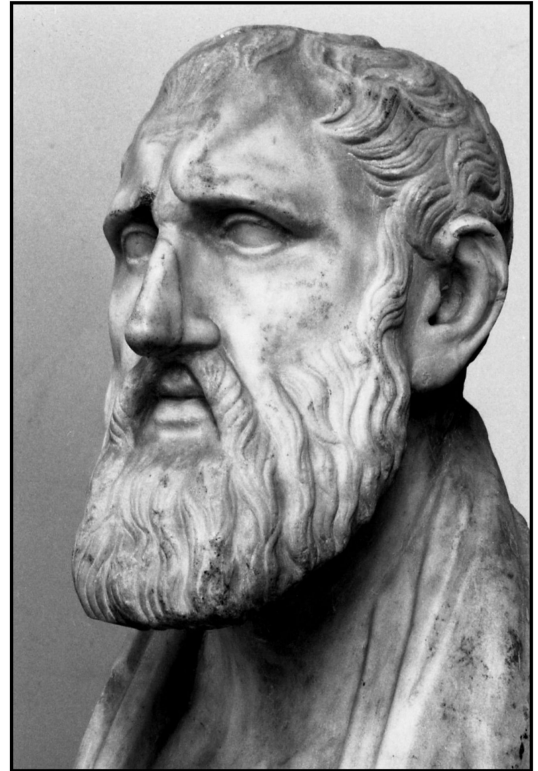
The universal nature out of the universal substance, as if it were wax, now molds the figure of a horse, then melting this down uses the material for a tree, next for a man, next for something else; and each of these things subsists for a very short time. Yet it is no hard-ship for a box to be broken up, as it was none for it to be nailed together.

Stoicism

The success of Marcus Aurelius as an Emperor owed much to his Stoicism. Gibbon (1776, Chapter III) remarked

At the age of twelve years he embraced the rigid system of the Stoics, which taught him to submit his body to his mind, his passions to his reason; to consider virtue as the only good, vice as the only evil, all things external as things indifferent. His meditations, composed in the tumult of the camp, are still extant; and he even condescended to give lessons of philosophy, in a more public manner than was perhaps consistent with the modesty of sage, or the dignity of an emperor. But his life was the noblest commentary on the precepts of Zeno. He was severe to himself, indulgent to the imperfections of others, just and beneficent to all mankind. ... War he detested, as the disgrace and calamity of human nature; but when the necessity of a just defence called upon him to take up arms, he readily exposed his person to eight winter campaigns, on the frozen banks of the Danube, the severity of which was at last fatal to the

weakness of his constitution.



Any understanding of the Emperor's philosophy and writings will require at least some brief acquaintance with Stoicism, the philosophical system initially proposed by philosophers in Athens, most importantly by Zeno of Citium (344-262 BCE). The illustration on the right shows a Roman copy of an Hellenic portrait bust of Zeno, now in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples.

The name derives from the *Stoa poikile* (painted porch) on the Northern edge of the *Agora* (gathering place) in the center of Athens, where Zeno and his followers met to discuss philosophy. Stoicism was one of several schools of philosophy Hellenistic Athens. Epicureanism and Skepticism were others.

Stoicism was mainly concerned with three areas of knowledge: logic, physics and ethics. According to Diogenes Laertius' *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* (3rd Century CE, quoted in Inwood & Gerson, p 110)

They compare philosophy to an animal, likening logic to the bones and sinews, ethics to the fleshier parts and physics to the soul. ... Or to a productive field, of which logic is the wall surrounding it, ethics the fruit and physics is the land and trees.

a) logic

The Stoics, particularly Chrysippus of Soli (279-206 BCE) made significant advances in formalizing our logic. Aristotle had given us term (or predicate) logic of the form

All men are mortal
Socrates is a man
Therefore Socrates is mortal

The Stoics described the principles of propositional (or statement) logic of which the following syllogisms are examples

If p then q	If p
then q	
Given p	Given
Not q	
Therefore q	
Therefore Not p	
(modus ponens)	(modus
tollens)	

Term logic deals with what things are; propositional logic deals with how things are related. Term logic provides us with classifications and definitions; propositional logic gives us causes and their effects.

b) physics

Stoic studies of logic had shown how the parts of the world were closely connected, and how reason could organize events according to cause and effect. The Stoics then proposed that

the whole universe is pervaded by an intelligence, called *logos* (word, thought, discourse, reason), that arranges everything to ensure the maximum benefit for all its components. The idea of a universe directed toward the good by Providence (from *pro+videre* to foresee) clearly differentiated the Stoics from the Epicureans, who proposed a universe composed of atoms that interact without purpose.

The ideas of the Stoics were later taken up by the early Christians, who proposed that Christ was the physical representation of the *logos*. The Apostle Paul gave a sermon in Athens to an assembly of philosophers, many of them Stoics, relating the new religion to their ideas:

God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands;

Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;

And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation;

That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us:

For in him we live, and move, and have our being (Acts 17: 24-28)

c) ethics

Ethics was the essence of stoicism. Philosophy should be considered as a way of life rather than a body of knowledge. Stoics proposed that we should act in "accord" with Nature – living our lives the way that the *logos* intended us to live, and thereby fulfilling our own human nature. Their goal was not the happiness sought by the Epicureans but the virtue attained by doing good. Nevertheless, virtue brings happiness

(or tranquility) through the knowledge that we are acting our part in the divine purpose of the universe.

The Stoics believed that things of themselves do not cause pain or happiness. These effects occur only if we allow our governing soul to be affected by them. The true stoic would not allow his or her inner self to be upset by pain or carried away by lust. Many have therefore concluded that the Stoic suppresses all emotion, but this is not true. As pointed out by Waterfield (2021, p lii) Stoics can experience three good feelings (*eupatheia*):

Volition (the rational pursuit of something), caution (the rational avoidance of something) and joy (rational elation).

Acting in accord with Nature means that we must do what we can to benefit our fellows. Stoics were drawn to formal public service. In this they once again distinguished themselves from the Epicureans who eschewed politics.

d) Roman Stoicism

The Romans took to Greek philosophy with enthusiasm. Although the poets were more likely to side with the Epicureans and live only for the moment, those in government found more comfort in Stoicism. They followed the ethics of Stoicism but cared little for the physics. It mattered not whether the universe was purposeful or random, one must still aspire to virtue. Seneca the Younger (4 BCE – 65 CE) wrote

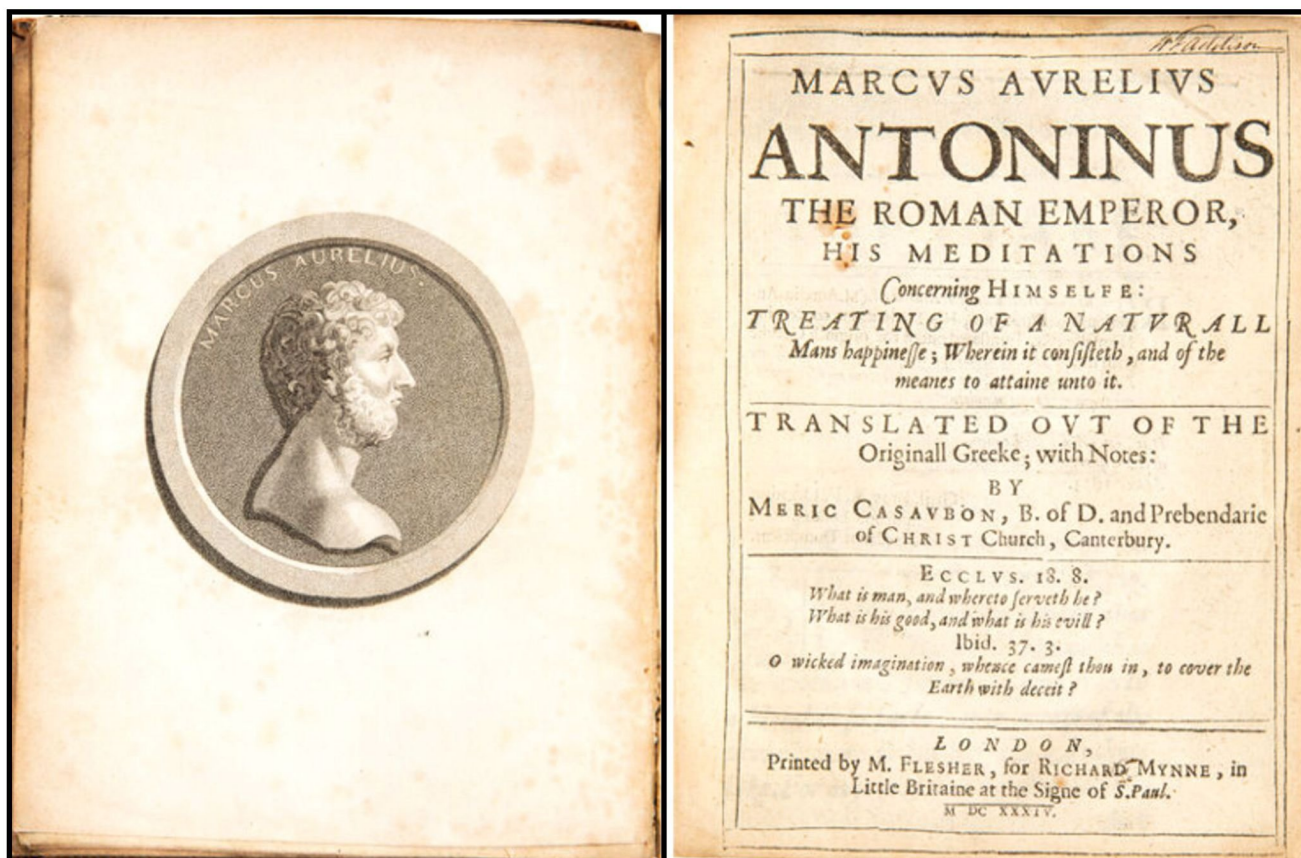
Someone will say, "What use is philosophy to me if there is fate? What use is it if God is in charge? What use, if chance has the mastery? For what is certain cannot be changed, and against what is uncertain there is no way to prepare oneself. Either God has pre-empted my planning and decreed what I should do, or fortune has left nothing for my planning to achieve." No matter which is true, Lucilius, or even if they all are, we must still practice philosophy. Perhaps the inexorable law of fate constrains us; perhaps

God, the universal arbiter, governs all events; perhaps it is chance that drives human affairs, and disrupts them: all the same, it is philosophy that must preserve us. Philosophy will urge us to give willing obedience to God, and but a grudging obedience to fortune. It will teach you to follow God; to cope with chance. (*Letters to Lucilius* 16: 4-5)

The *Meditations*

During the last years of his life, Marcus would retire by himself in his army tent near the Danube to contemplate and to write about what he was thinking. As befitting their philosophical nature, these thoughts were written in Greek, even though Marcus was not completely fluent in this language. After his death Marcus' notes were compiled by his secretaries into a book called *Tὰ εἰς ἑαυτόν* (*Ta Eis Heauton*, "Things to oneself"). Meric Casaubon entitled his translation of the book *Meditations* (1634), and this title has become widely accepted in English. German uses *Selbstbetrachtungen*, self-examinations, and French uses the simple *Pensées*, thoughts. The illustration below shows the title page of Casaubon's translation. He uses as an epigraph a quotation from *Ecclesiasticus* 18:8

What is man, and whereto serveth he? What is his good, and what is his evil?



In the first section (Book I) Marcus thanks those who helped him during his life. The next sections (Books II to XII) contain a variety of thoughts, questions, quotations, aphorisms, and longer discussions. Each of these sections is a combination of a diary of his thoughts and a “commonplace book” – a trove of ideas to be evaluated and remembered. The writing has no overall organizing principle, is very repetitious and occasionally contradicts itself. The ideas are easier to read intermittently and randomly rather than in sequence.

The book is not easy to translate. Marcus’ Greek “is not noted for its elegance; it can be crabbed and awkward” (Hard, 2011). His “writing is often concise, occasionally even to the point of being no more than notes and jottings” (Waterfield, 2021). The “expressions are often obscure and he uses awkward and unusual construction” (Staniforth 1964). As an example of the difficulties, we can look at the various translations of the famous first sentence of Book II Chapter 11:

Ὡς ἤδη δυνατοῦ ὄντος ἐξιέναι τοῦ βίου, οὕτως ἕκαστα ποιεῖν καὶ λέγειν καὶ διανοεῖσθαι.

However/by

now/mighty/truly/sum/any/life,/therefore/each/action/and/word/and/be minded.

Casaubon (1634): Whatsoever thou dost affect, whatsoever thou dost project, so do, and so project all, as one who, for aught thou knowest, may at this very present depart out of this life.

Long (1862): Since it is possible that you may depart from life this very moment, regulate every act and thought accordingly.

Haines (1916): Let thine every deed and word and thought be those of a man who can depart from life this moment.

Staniforth (1964): In all you do or say or think, recollect that at any time the power of withdrawal from life is in your own hands.

Hard (2011): Let your every action, word and thought be those of one who could depart from life at any moment.

Dewinetz (2019): You could die right now, so act like it.

Waterfield (2021): Everything you do and say and think should be predicated on the possibility of your imminent departure from life.

Other than this famous exhortation to live as if one were about to die, the following are some of the main ideas proposed in *The Meditations*:

(i) assent

The universe is proceeding as it must. The mind must live in accord with the universe, accepting its ends and not worrying

about its means.

Always think of the universe as one living organism, with a single substance and a single soul: and observe how all things are submitted to the single perceptivity of this one whole, all are moved by its single impulse, and all play their part in the causation of every event that happens. Remark the intricacy of the skein, the complexity of the web. (IV: 40, Staniforth)

There are thus two reasons why you should be contented with whatever happens to you. Firstly, that it was for you that it came about, and it was prescribed for you and stands in a special relationship to you as something that was woven into your destiny from the beginning ...and secondly that, for the power which governs the whole that which comes to each of us individually contributes to its own well-being and perfection. (V: 48, Hard)

We are all working together to one end, some with knowledge and design, and others without knowing what they do. (VI: 42, Long)

(ii) tranquility

The person has three parts – the body, the spirit and the mind (or ruling center). The impressions from the world affect the body and activate the spirit. Yet one must not let the mind be ruled by these reflex activations. One must keep oneself beyond the reach of the passions by retreating into the mind and acting only according to reason:

Be like a headland: the waves beat against it continuously, but it stands fast and around it the boiling water dies down. (IV: 49, Waterfield)

An intelligence free of passions is a mighty citadel, for man has no stronghold more secure to which he can retreat. (VIII: 48, Hard)

(iii) benevolence

One should help others as best one can.

That which is not in the interests of the hive cannot be in the interests of the bee (VI: 53, Haines)

Men exist for the sake of one another. Teach them or bear with them. (VIII: 59, Long).

Precisely because you personally are part of the whole that is the body politic, every one of your actions should contribute to a life the purpose of which is to improve society (IX: 23, Waterfield)

First, never act without plan and purpose. Second, set your sights on no other goal but the common good. (XII: 20, Waterfield)

Epilogue

Throughout *The Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius insists that his own life was but a tiny moment in the life of the universe and that he would not be remembered beyond his death:

Soon you will have forgotten the world, and soon the world will have forgotten you (VII;21, Staniforth).

Keep all time and all being constantly before your mind, and see that, in terms of being, every individual thing is no more than a fig seed, and in terms of time no more than a twist of a drill (X: 17, Waterfield)

Despite these comments, Marcus Aurelius has been remembered and revered for almost two millennia. I shall complete the post with a longer quotation from *The Meditations* about the passage of time, and with a photograph of the one of his best-preserved portrait busts, now in the Musée Saint-Raymond in Toulouse.



A person's lifetime is a moment, his existence a flowing

stream, his perception dull, the entire fabric of his body readily subject to decay, his soul an aimless wanderer, his fortune erratic, his fame uncertain. In short: the body is nothing but a river; the soul is dream and delusion; life is war and a sojourn in a strange land; and oblivion is all there is to posthumous fame. What, then, can escort us safely on our way? Only one thing: philosophy. This consists in keeping the guardian spirit within us safe from assault and harm, never swayed by pleasure or pain, purposeful when it acts, free from dishonesty or dissemblance, and never dependent on action or inaction from anyone else. It also consists in accepting what happens, the lot one has been assigned, as coming from the same source as oneself, and in always awaiting death with a serene mind, understanding that it's no more than the disintegration of the elements of which every living creature is a compound. If there's nothing unusual in the elements themselves changing moment by moment one into another, why should the alteration and disintegration of them all be a cause for anxiety? It's in accord with nature, and nothing that's in accord with nature is bad. Book II:17 (Waterfield, 2021)

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Condemned to be Free

When Paris was liberated in August, 1944, everything was possible. A new world needed to be created to protect their regained freedom. The philosophy that epitomized this desire for freedom was “existentialism.” The term, originally used in a derogatory sense to characterize those who followed the philosophical concept of the primacy of “being,” was grudgingly accepted by Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir as a description of their thinking. Existentialism fitted easily with the idea of the absurd proposed by Albert Camus. These concepts became the main focus of both art and philosophy in the decade that followed the end of World War II.

Existentialism

Although there were precursors, existentialism was largely the work of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986). They met in 1929 and became lifelong companions, although they were never married and never monogamous (Bakewell, 2016; Seymour-Jones, 2008). Women should be just as free as men (de Beauvoir, 1949). In the *agrégation en philosophie* of 1930, a national exam organized by the French civil service, Sartre and de Beauvoir placed first and second. Sartre was short – about 5 feet – and the exotropia of his right eye (caused by a childhood infection) gave him a disconcerting appearance; de Beauvoir was tall – about 5 feet 10 inches – and elegant.



Sartre and de Beauvoir were the leading intellectuals of France during the war. In a break with tradition, they were as much creative artists as philosophers. The theory of Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant* (*Being and Nothingness*) was illustrated in the novel *La Nausée* (1938), and in the plays and *Les Mouches* (1943) and *Huis Clos* (1944). Since art is far more convincing than theory, existentialism became more popular than any previous philosophy.

The main tenets of existentialism were summarized by Sartre in a lecture in October 1945, subsequently published as *Existentialisme est un humanisme* (1946). The key to the philosophy is the idea that "existence precedes essence:"

What do we mean here by "existence precedes essence"? We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself. If man as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature since there is no God to conceive of it. Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism. (Sartre, 1946)

We could therefore not look to God for guidance as to what was right. Instead, we must create our own morality. In her essay *Existentialisme et la sagesse des nations* (1945), de Beauvoir wrote:

I throw myself without help and without guidance into a world where I am not installed ahead of time waiting for myself. I am free, and my projects are not defined by pre-existing interests; they posit their own ends. ... Man may not be naturally good, but he is not naturally bad either; he is nothing at first. It is up to him to make himself good or bad depending on whether he assumes his freedom or renounces it. (de Beauvoir, 1945).

In addition to being responsible for his own actions, a person must by his or her example be responsible for the actions of others. The recognition of others is part and parcel of the

existential being:

Therefore, the man who becomes aware of himself directly in the *cogito* also perceives all others, and he does so as the condition of his own existence. He realizes that he cannot be anything (in the sense in which we say someone is spiritual, or cruel, or jealous) unless others acknowledge him as such. I cannot discover any truth whatsoever about myself except through the mediation of another. The other is essential to my existence, as well as to the knowledge I have of myself. (Sartre, 1946).

And so, we are “condemned to be free:”

If, however, God does not exist, we will encounter no values or orders that can legitimize our conduct. Thus, we have neither behind us, nor before us, in the luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse. We are left alone and without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free: condemned, because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. (Sartre, 1946).

The existentialism of Sartre was atheistic. If there is no Creator, there is no design that defines the essence of man and that determines how he should act. Man defines his own essence. However, although most existentialists tended to atheism, several religious thinkers promulgated a Christian variant of existentialism (Marcel, 1949,1951; Macquarrie, 1965). In this philosophy existence is a gift – we are allowed rather than condemned to be free. Faith is an act of freedom.

Being

Sartre had studied the philosophy of Husserl and Heidegger in the period when he was appointed to the *Institut français*

d'Allemagne in Berlin (1933-34). The title of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943) clearly alluded to Martin Heidegger's, *Being and Time* (1927). The concept of existence preceding essence was likely derived from Heidegger's philosophy, which distinguished man from other beings in terms of his freedom. Heidegger (§10) did claim that *existentia* preceded *essentia*, but for him the latter was simply the properties of a being, without Sartre's connotation of a design used in the creation of particular examples (Flynn, 2014, p 237; Webber, 2018, p 8). For Heidegger, human beings were distinct from other beings since their consciousness granted them a particular point of view within the world – a *Da-Sein* or “being-there.” One of Heidegger's numerous neologisms described this as *Jemeinigkeit* – always being my own being. *Da-Sein* was characterized by embodiment, location in space and time, and an awareness of mortality. Heidegger denied that he was an existentialist, though many have so described him (e.g., Kaufmann, 1963; Macquarie, 1965; Flynn, 2006).

Heidegger (1889-1976) had become Professor of Philosophy at the University of Freiburg in 1928, and was elected Rector in 1933, the year that Hitler came to power. Heidegger was entranced by the idea of the German *Volk* and became an enthusiastic member of the Nazi Party. He claimed to have been blind to the racism and warmongering of the party, but his reputation was forever tainted by his support of Hitler. Heidegger was a philosopher who recognized the importance of being, and realized the freedom it entailed. Yet he failed to exercise that freedom with responsibility. One of the main ideas of the existentialism proposed by Sartre and de Beauvoir was the necessity that actions freely chosen must be held accountable.

The Absurd

At the opening night of *Les Mouches* in 1943, Albert Camus (1913-1960) introduced himself to Sartre. Camus had just published a novel *L'Étranger* and a book of philosophical

essays entitled *Le mythe de Sisyphe*. Sartre had been impressed by these works, and he was charmed by the young author. Sartre and Camus became fast friends (Aronson, 2004; Zaretsky, 2013).

Camus was an Algerian of French origin (derogatively known as a “pied noir,” though no one is completely sure of the origin of the term). After graduating from university, he joined the Algerian Communist Party and wrote for a leftist newspaper in Algiers. When this was banned by the new government of occupied France in 1940, Camus moved to Paris. There he worked for *Combat*, the clandestine newspaper of the French Resistance, becoming its editor in 1944. Throughout his life he suffered from chronic tuberculosis. The 1954 portrait below is by Karsh.



Camus' *Le Mythe of Sisyphe* has the most striking opening of any work of philosophy:

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest – whether or not the world has three dimensions whether the mind has nine of twelve categories – comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer.

Camus points out the paradox of the question. What makes life worth living – whether it be freedom, truth, love, beauty – is also that for which one is willing to die. The absurd rests at the heart of the human condition (Carroll, 2007). The word derives from the Latin *ab* (from, out of) and *surdus* which means deaf (and by association, silent) and generally means lacking in reason or meaning. Nagel (1971) describes our sense of the absurd as the discrepancy between how seriously we attempt to understand the universe and how arbitrarily the universe actually proceeds. Camus describes it:

What, then, is that incalculable feeling that deprives the mind of the sleep necessary to life? A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. (Camus, 1942).

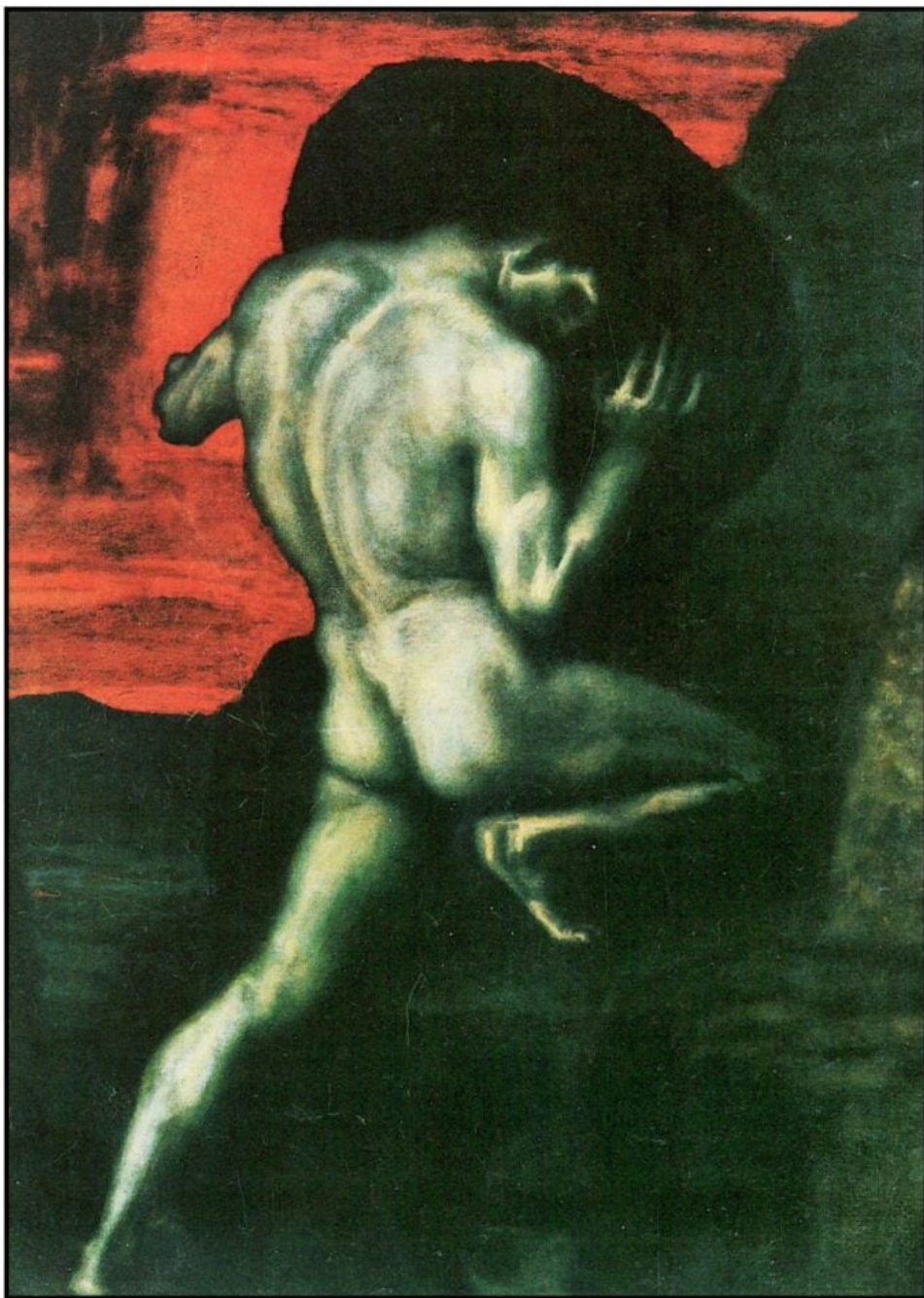
Camus traces the idea of absurdity in Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche and Kafka. (The chapter on Kafka was removed from the initial edition of the book by the censors since Kafka was Jewish). Camus finds that the absurdity of the human condition is what makes artistic creation necessary. He quotes Nietzsche (from the *Nachlass*)

We have art in order not to die of the truth.

And proceeds to describe the process of art in an absurd world:

The problem for the absurd artist is to acquire this *savoir-vivre* which transcends *savoir-faire*. And in the end, the great artist under this climate is, above all, a great living being, it being understood that living in this case is just as much experiencing as reflecting. The work then embodies an intellectual drama. The absurd work illustrates thought's renouncing of its prestige and its resignation to being no more than the intelligence that works up appearances and covers with images what has no reason. If the world were clear, art would not exist.

Camus concludes his book with an essay on Sisyphus. The illustration below shows a 1920 painting by Franz von Stuck. Sisyphus refused to accept death and insisted on living. For this love of life, the gods condemned him forever to roll an immense boulder up a hill only to have it roll back as soon as it reached the top, so that he must continuously begin again. Camus sees in Sisyphus the artist in an absurd world:



I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

Darkness at Noon

Between the liberation and the elections leading to the Fourth Republic in 1946, France was governed by the Gouvernement Provisoire de la République Française, consisting of representatives from the communist party, the socialists, and the Christian democrats. Given the economic debacle of the 1930s and the war against the fascists, politics tended toward the left and many considered the possibility of joining the international communist revolution. However, the institution of the Marshall Plan in 1947 led the French government to exclude the communists from the governing coalition. The Cold war was beginning.

Everyone remembered Stalin's Great Purge of 1937 and 1938, wherein countless members of the military and the government were put on trial for being traitors to the revolution, and either executed or sent to forced-labor camps in the Gulag. The most striking of these trials was that of Nikolai Bukharin, who had written *The ABC of Communism* (the "communist bible"), and who had served on the Politburo and the Comintern. The illustration below shows Bukharin with Stalin in 1929 on the tribune of the Lenin Mausoleum on Red Square in Moscow.



At his trial Bukharin confessed to his crimes against the Revolution, but did not acknowledge any specific acts of treason. His confession is often interpreted as the last act of a true believer – one who willingly sacrificed himself so that the revolution might prosper.

In 1940, Arthur Koestler published *Darkness at Noon*, a novel that is based on the interrogation and trial of Bukharin. The title, derived from Job 5:14 by Koestler's translator and mistress, Daphne Hardy, described the state of moral confusion that surrounded the trial.

They meet with darkness in the day time, and grope in the noonday as in the night.

The novel's main character, Rubashov, undergoes three interrogations and finally admits to betraying the revolution, and is executed. The issue is whether it is justified to

abrogate present morality for the sake of a future utopia. Should one deny truth and justice in order to bring about a paradise promised, but certainly not guaranteed, by the revolution. As the epitaph for the second interrogation Koestler quoted from Dietrich von Nieheim's 1410 history of the Avignon papacy:

When the existence of the Church is threatened, she is released from the commandments of morality. With unity as the end, the use of every means is sanctified, even deceit, treachery, violence, usury, prison, and death. Because order serves the good of the community, the individual must be sacrificed for the common good.

When published in France in 1944, Koestler's novel initiated extensive discussion. Could the show trials, the executions and the labor camps of the USSR be justified by the goals of the communist revolution? How far can the ends justify the means? In the years that followed World War II, the USSR continued to restrict the freedom of its artists, and to conduct show trials of those who had supposedly betrayed the revolution. In his 1947 essay on *Humanism and Terror*, Merleau-Ponty attempted to justify the purges and the labor camps. Merleau-Ponty later recanted, but Sartre continued his steadfast support of the communists, despite the Berlin blockade (1948-9) and the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution (1956). Only when the USSR invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968, did he finally renounce the USSR's claim to represent the true course of history

Man in Revolt

In 1951, Camus published *L'homme révolté*. The title is usually translated as *The Rebel*, though Camus is more concerned with revolution than rebellion – with changing society for the future rather than reacting against the past. In this work, Camus considered whether violence can be justified in order to

alter the course of history toward a better future. The book poses a question complementary to that posed in *Le mythe de Sisyphe*:

In the age of negation, it was to some avail to examine one's position concerning suicide. In the age of ideologies, we must examine our position in relation to murder.

In his book Camus reviews the history of revolution and terror as treated by philosophers and writers. He considers Ivan's story of the "Grand Inquisitor" in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* as representative of how revolutions end with loss of freedom:

the Grand Inquisitors who imprison Christ and come to tell Him that His method is not correct, that universal happiness cannot be achieved by the immediate freedom of choosing between good and evil, but by the domination and unification of the world. The first step is to conquer and rule. The kingdom of heaven will, in fact, appear on earth, but it will be ruled over by men – a mere handful to begin with, who will be the Caesars, because they were the first to understand – and later, with time, by all men. (Camus, 1951).

Camus castigates the totalitarian movements of the 20th Century – communism and fascism – for promising freedom but, in reality, making the people mindless slaves. The future must not be used to justify violence in the present. In opposition to totalitarianism he proposed, albeit not very forcefully, the need for solidarity and moderation.

Camus, the one-time communist, had come to realize that the cult of history can support crimes against humanity. He had thus distanced himself from many of his intellectual friends who supported the ideals of the communist revolution. His book was lauded by right-wing critics, and led to a complete

rupture with Sartre (Aronson, 2004; Forsdick, 2007)

Sartre, the editor of *Les Temps Modernes* disliked the book's conclusions, but did not wish to review it personally because of his friendship with Camus. Ultimately, he arranged for a very negative review by Francis Jeanson to be published in the journal. Jeanson's critique infuriated Camus, who immediately wrote a rebuttal. He felt it inappropriate to be described as "being separated from reality" given his activity with the Résistance:

I am beginning to get a little tired of seeing myself – and even more, of seeing former militants who have never refused the struggles of their time – endlessly receive lessons in efficacy from critics who have never done anything more than turn their seats in the direction of history.

Jeanson replied to Camus, and Sartre then published a patronizing public letter to Camus, beginning "My dear Camus," wherein he accuses him of a "dismal self-importance" and claimed:

If you really hope to prevent any movement of the people from degenerating into tyranny, don't begin by condemning it without appeal, and threatening to retreat to a desert.

Camus and Sartre never talked again.

The Death of Camus



On January 4, 1960, Camus died in a car accident. After celebrating the New Year in Lourmarin, he accepted a ride back to Paris with his publisher Michel Gallimard. Gallimard was driving, Camus was in the front and Gallimard's wife and daughter were in the back. The car suffered a punctured tire at high speed and crashed into a tree. Camus was killed instantly and Michel Gallimard died several days later. Gallimard's wife and daughter survived.

There has been some speculation that the tire was sabotaged by the KGB to silence Camus as a critic of international communism (Catelli, 2020). However, there is little hard evidence. It is easier to accept the crash as another example of the arbitrary absurdity of human life. Camus had intended

to take the train back to Paris, before Michel Gallimard offered him a ride in his luxurious Facel Vega.

In his eulogy for his old friend, Sartre, who had not been in contact with Camus since 1952 wrote:

He represented in our time the latest example of that long line of *moralistes* whose works constitute perhaps the most original element in French letters. His obstinate humanism, narrow and pure, austere and sensual, waged an uncertain war against the massive and formless events of the time. (Sartre, 1960).

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The Axial Age

In his 1949 book *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (translated in 1953 as *The Origin and Goal of History*), Karl Jaspers proposed that the millennium before the time of Christ (or more specifically 800-200 BCE) could be considered an *Achsenzeit* or “Axial Age.” During this period, in five isolated regions of the world (China, India, Persia, Israel/Palestine, and Greece), human society and thought changed radically and irreversibly. A world that had until then been understood in terms of legends (*mythos*) was now examined in the light of reason (*logos*). During this time, “hitherto unconsciously accepted ideas, customs and conditions were subjected to examination, questioned and liquidated.” A multiplicity of gods and demons ceded their power to one universal god or life force. Sages, prophets and philosophers proposed rules for how we should behave. Though the axial age passed long ago, we still return to these teachings for moral guidance.

Karl Jaspers (1883-1969)



Jaspers trained in medicine and spent his early years as a psychiatrist. Due to his chronic lung disease, he found the demands of the clinic exhausting, and switched his interest to psychology and philosophy. Since he was married to a Jew, he lost his teaching position at Heidelberg University in 1937, and barely survived World War II without being arrested. After the war he moved to Basel, Switzerland, and presented an influential set of lectures on *The Question of German Guilt* in 1947.

Though he disliked the term, Jaspers became one of the existentialists. Confronted with the reality of a world that is beyond our powers of understanding, we have no recourse but to proclaim our own existence and connect with that which transcends reality. The following two quotations (via Walraff, 1970) from Jaspers' *Philosophie*, originally published in 1932, are noteworthy since they foreshadow his later thinking on the Axial Age:

Every limit encountered by scientific investigation provides an opportunity to transcend. There are two kinds of limits. On the negative side appears the irrationality of the

incalculable—the unintelligibility manifested by physical “constants,” atomic movements, and the so-called contingency of natural laws. On this side we are confronted by matter—the other that is not permeated by Logos. On the positive side it is freedom that appears as a limit. The sort of independently existing being that, because of its resistance, physical science could determine, though only negatively [as an unknown and unknowable thing-in-itself], now is assuredly present. The natural sciences (Naturwissenschaften) undertake to capture the cognitively impenetrable with their laws and theories; the humanistic disciplines (Geisteswissenschaften) submit the results and appearances of freedom to interpretation in terms of their own laws, norms, and meanings. But the final boundary is, for the natural sciences, the dark absolutely other, and for the humanistic disciplines the freedom of Existenz as a source of communication. This latter leads me to myself.

If everything that cognitive orientation yields in the form of universally and necessarily valid knowledge is to be called “world,” then the question arises as to whether being extends beyond the world, and thought beyond orientation within the world. The soul and God—or Existenz and Transcendence as we say when we exchange the language of mythology for that of philosophy—lie outside of the world. We cannot know them in the sense in which we know things within the world. . . . Although they are not known, they are not nothing, and while they are not accessible to science they can still be thought of.

The Origin and Goal of History (1949/1953)

Jasper devoted the first section of his book on history to the *Achsenzeit* or Axial Age (which was also considered in a brief paper for *Commentary* in 1948). The German word *Achse* can mean “axis” (a reference line about which a vector can rotate, or

which serves as a basis for measurement), “axle” (about which wheels rotate), or “pivot” (a point about which something turns). Jasper was likely using all of these meanings, though the idea of the pivot seems most salient.

This axis would be situated at the point in history which gave birth to everything which, since then, man has been able to be, the point most overwhelmingly fruitful in fashioning humanity (p 1)

The Axial Age gave birth both to our modern rational way of thinking and to the major world religions:

What is new about this age, in all three areas of the world, is that man becomes conscious of Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations. He experiences the terror of the world and his own powerlessness. He asks radical questions. Face to face with the void he strives for liberation and redemption. By consciously recognising his limits he sets himself the highest goals. He experiences absoluteness in the depths of selfhood and in the lucidity of transcendence. (p 2)

In comparison Pre-Axial cultures appear unawakened – “as though man had not really come of himself” (p 7). Mythical narratives that were part of the pre-axial culture were sometimes maintained, but these were interpreted as parables rather than as fact.

Jaspers identified five cultures as participating in the Axial Age: China with the teachings of Confucius and Lao Tze, India with the Upanishads and the Buddha, Iran/Persia with Zoroaster/Zarathustra, Israel/Palestine with the prophets Elijah, Isaiah and Jeremiah, and Greece with their philosophers and tragedians. These regions developed the new Axial way of thinking synchronously and independently. The changes likely resulted from the fact that these societies were in a state of war and turmoil, and people were avidly

seeking respite from the chaos (pp 17-18).

According to Jaspers the importance of the Axial Age (pp18-20) was that

a) it was related to humanity in general rather than to specific groups:

It is one thing to see the unity of history from one's own ground and in the light of one's own faith, another to think of it in communication with every other human ground, linking one's own consciousness to the alien consciousness (p 19)

b) it promoted communication and discussion, with an acknowledgement that no one has an exclusive grasp of the truth.

c) it was pre-eminent in its creativity – the writings of the sages of this period have become a yardstick against which all later creations are measured:

Until today mankind has lived by what happened during the Axial Period, by what was thought and created during that period. In each new upward flight it returns in recollection to this period and is fired anew by it. (p 7)

The Axial Age was essential to Jaspers' schema of human history (pp 24-26) which proposed with three main stages in human development:

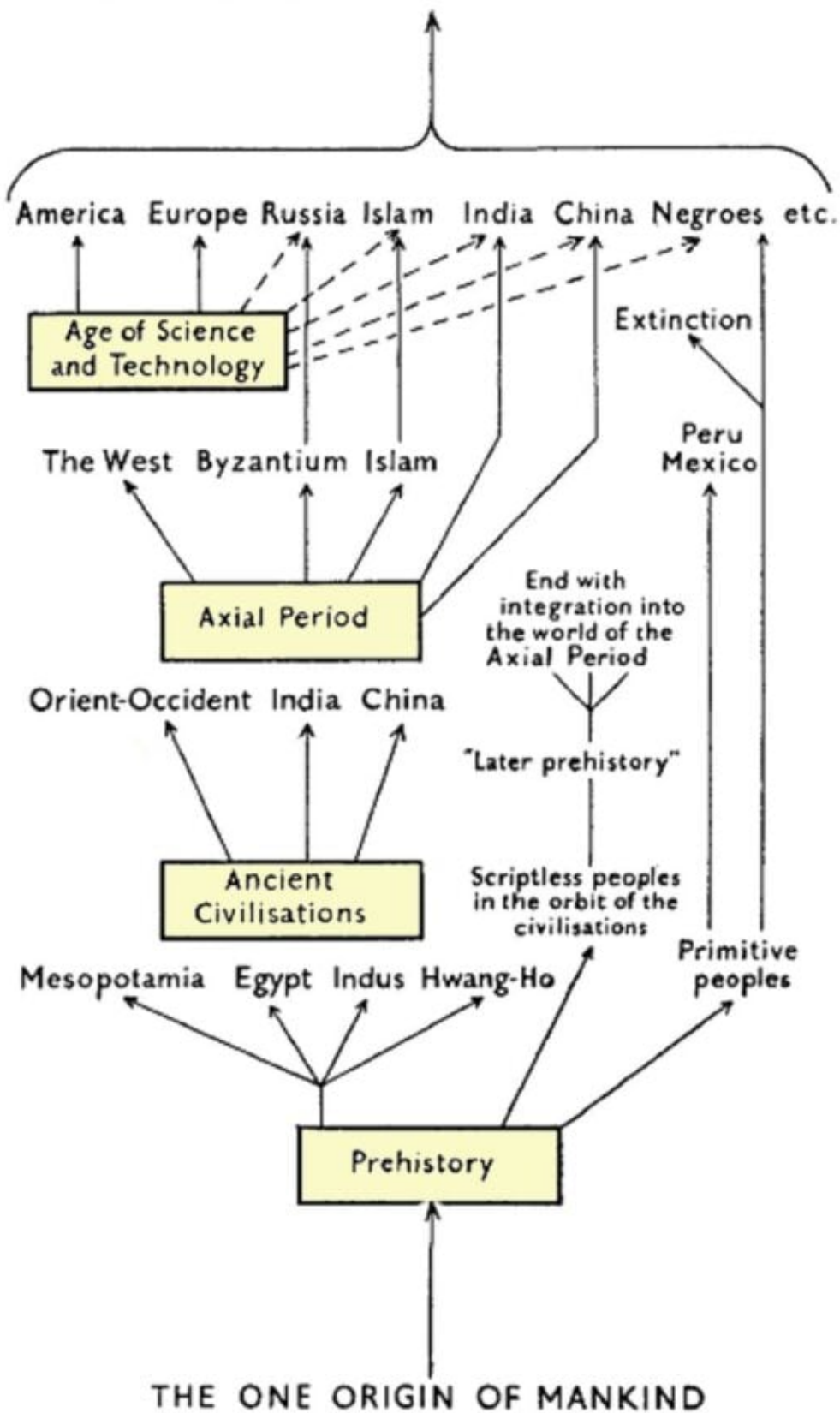
(i) the foundation of the major ancient civilizations in Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, Northern India (valley of the Indus River) and Northern China (valley of the Huang-Ho/Yellow River)

(ii) the Axial Age in five particular regions (China, India, Persia, Palestine, Greece) wherein civilization was allowed to grow spiritually

(iii) the age of science and technology initiated and

developed in the West (Europe and North America) and then transferred (dashed lines) to other regions of the globe

THE ONE WORLD OF MANKIND ON THE EARTH



Jaspers' thinking about the Axial Age was far from precise, and has been criticized extensively (see Mullins et al, 2018). His characterization of Axial thinking appears more of a post hoc description of the cultures that he chose to include in his survey than any defining criteria for Axiality.

It is unclear why the cultures of Egypt under Akhenaten (14th Century BCE), or of Mesopotamia in the time of Hammurabi (18th Century BCE) were not considered Axial. Perhaps these cultures were too transient to be considered Axial. However, as Jaspers points out, the cultures that he included in his Axial Age also did not last.

Among the cultures that he does include, some definitely predate his Axial Period. Although the life of Zarathustra is impossible to date, his teachings appear to come from the Second Millennium BCE (Boyce, 1984; Rose, 2011). Jewish thought may have been formally written down during the Axial period but its basic ideas originated before the time of Solomon (10th Century BCE).

Although Jaspers stresses the importance of the 1st Millennium BCE to the origin of the major world religions, Christianity and Islam – the two religions with the most adherents in the modern world – began after the Axial Period. The interpretation that

Christianity and Islam fall outside the axial age chronologically, but are historically intelligible only as developments of Israel's axial breakthrough (Bellah, 2072)

inappropriately discounts their clear origins in the 1st and 7th Centuries CE.

Nevertheless, Jaspers' concept of an Axial Age was enthusiastically taken up by many scholars of religion

(Armstrong, 2004, 2005, 2006; Bellah, 2005, 2011; Eisenstadt, 1986; Schwartz, 1975). The period has been given several other names: the Moral Revolution (Halton, 2014); the Great Transformation (Armstrong, 2006); the Age of Transcendence (Schwartz, 1975), and the theoretic age (Donald, 1991).

Extension of the Idea of Axiality

Each of those who followed Jasper fleshed out the description of the Axial Age to include some defining features:

a) the formulation of an ethical rather than coercive morality. People should do what is right and not what those in power demand. Leaders may be necessary but their powers must not be absolute. Every person should have equal opportunities for success in life.

b) the idea of a “moralizing god,” a supreme force who (or which) requires human beings to live a good life, rewards virtuous behavior, punishes the sinful (typically in an afterlife), and always knows when laws are being transgressed.

c) the replacement of the ritual of animal (or human) sacrifice by the life of religious devotion. The divine does not require the sacrifice of animals but rather the dedication of a believer’s life to compassion and service.

d) the creation of concepts not immediately related to the external world. The Axial Age addressed questions such as what happens after death and whether the world was exactly how it appears. As Schwartz (1975) stated this “transcendent” type of thinking was “a kind of standing back and looking beyond – a kind of critical, reflective questioning of the actual and a new vision of what lies beyond.”

e) the use of external memory devices such as written records (Donald, 1991). This allowed culture and technology to be transmitted from one generation to another without the need for their continual rediscovery.

Seshat History of the Axial Age (2019)



The Seshat (Turchin, 2015) is a data bank of global history, founded in 2011 and used by many different investigators to examine questions about human cultural evolution, economic development and sociological change. These studies support the new field of “cliodynamics” – the science of historical change – a term deriving from the Greek Goddess of History. The data bank itself is named after Seshat, the Egyptian Goddess of Wisdom and Knowledge. Seshat is usually depicted holding a palm stem on which she notches the passage of time. She wears a leopard skin, the pattern of which denotes the stars and eternity. Above her head is a seven-pointed emblem, the meaning of which is not known, but may signify enlightenment.

In 2019, Hoyer and Reddish edited the results of a *Seshat History of the Axial Age*. The study looked at societies in

multiple regions of the world and at multiple times in order to determine when the characteristics of the Axial Age became apparent. Because it is relatively easy to document, the study focussed on the origins of defined moral principles, such as the definition of moral norms often in terms of a legal code, the setting of punishments for the violation of moral rules, the conceptualization of an omniscient and omnipotent supernatural force or being that required obedience to the law, and constraints on the power of social leaders. The study confirmed that these principles began during the 1st millennium BCE in the regions named in Jaspers' book. However, the principles also became evident in other regions at other times.

The conclusion was therefore that axuality was not an age but rather a "stage" in the evolution of a complex society:

the initial rise of archaic states led to the distortion and repression of at least some components of natural morality and that axuality provided a way of restoring those principles, and especially their cohesion-building effects, under the guise of a more benevolent regime of supernatural enforcement in ways that applied equally to rich and poor, the powerful and the meek. Such a restoration, we have argued, was necessary for political systems to evolve beyond the megasociety threshold. (pp 406-7)



Turchin (2018) has proposed that as states or empires reach a particular size (in terms of population) and level of complexity (in terms of the different factions within that population) dissension arises between those who lead the state and those who are its subjects. The state may then fail, either through external forces taking advantage of the internal divisions in the state, or through the rebellion of its constituent parts. Developing a sense of “group feeling” or “collective solidarity” can prevent the internal dissension and help fight against external forces. This group feeling was present in early small bands of human beings, but needed to be reinstated when the groups became larger and more susceptible to despotic rule. Turchin names this solidarity *asabiya* – a word used by the Islamic scholar Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) in his studies of the peoples of the Maghreb (Northern Africa). A bust of Ibn Khaldun on the right is located at the Casbah of Bejaia in Algeria.

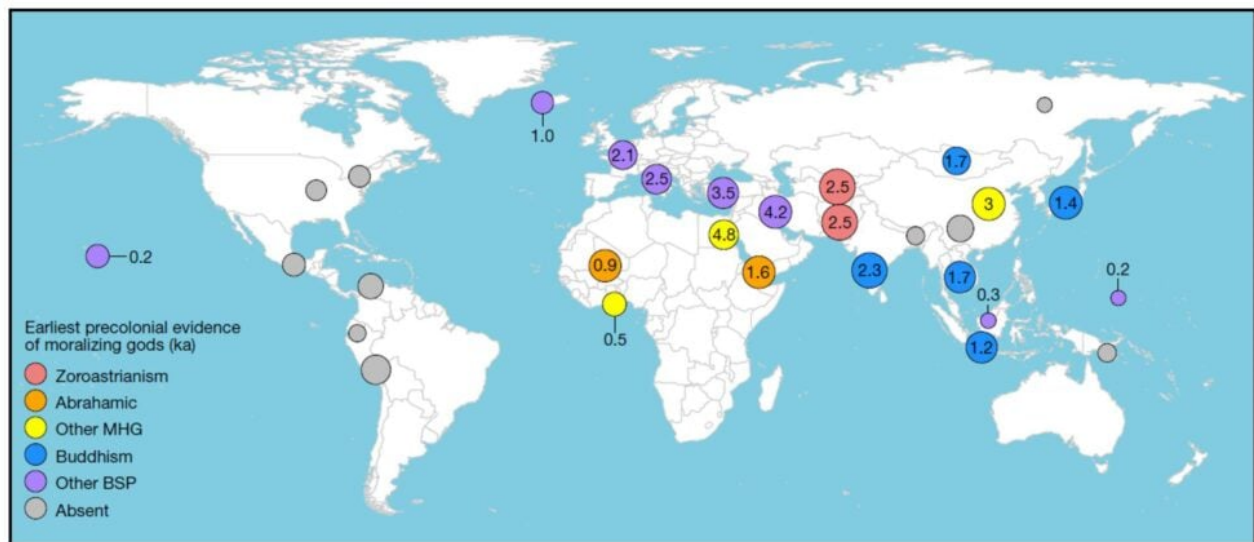
The Seshat data bank has allowed scholars to relate the rise of such moral principles as “moralizing high gods” and “broad supernatural punishment” (heaven and hell) to the level of social complexity, as measured using the principal component of an analysis of 51 measurements of government levels, infrastructure, written records, religious texts, financial instruments, etc. Whitehouse et al. (2019) examined 30 different regions of the world and found that these moral principles only occurred after a significant increase in social complexity.

powerful moralizing ‘big gods’ and prosocial supernatural punishment tend to appear only after the emergence of ‘megasocieties’ with populations of more than around one million people. Moralizing gods are not a prerequisite for the evolution of social complexity, but they may help to sustain and expand complex multi-ethnic empires after they have become established.

The authors therefore suggest that

if moralizing gods do not cause the evolution of complex societies, they may represent a cultural adaptation that is necessary to maintain cooperation in such societies once they have exceeded a certain size, perhaps owing to the need to subject diverse populations in multi-ethnic empires to a common higher-level power.

A map of the 30 different regions that they evaluated shows that the first occurrence of moralizing high gods (MHG) was in ancient Egypt when the idea of *maat* – universal justice – was first proposed 4.8 ka (thousand years before the present). The size of the circles represents the relative complexity of the society in that region.



Jaspers' axial societies are represented by Confucianism in Northern China 3 ka, Zoroastrianism in Persia 2.5 ka and Buddhism in India 2.3 ka. This particular Seshat survey did not include Jaspers' other two axial regions – Greece and Palestine. Although Christianity was and is one of the great religions with a moralizing high God and broad supernatural punishment (BSP), regions of Europe (early Rome and Celtic France) developed such ideas prior to their actual conversion to Christianity. Although large societies developed in the Americas, these were not characterized by moralizing high gods and this (in addition to their technological inferiority) may have rendered them susceptible to colonization by the Christian countries.

Conclusion

Modern religions are characterized by a moral code that promotes the social virtues of compassion and temperance and a concept of justice administered either by an omnipotent deity or by a universal force. These religions originated when societies became sufficiently complex that they needed their citizens to feel solidarity with each other. A sense of morality was a tool for survival when humans lived in small groups. Codified and intensified by the sages and prophets of more complex societies, morality then became the glue that held together empires. Several of our modern religions

originated in the 1st Millennium BCE in what Jaspers described as the Axial Age. However, others originated at other times and we must consider axiality as a stage in the development of any human society rather than as a particular age

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