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The Universe as an Answer

Human Symbiosis with Plants

Plato's Esoteric Teachings

Epigenetics: Taking Responsibility for our Lives

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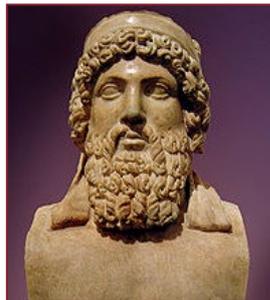
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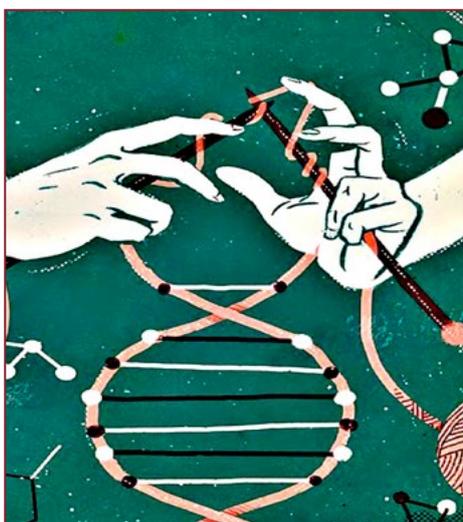
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Editorial

Altruism exists, and we need to cultivate it

There are two quotes from the book *Altruism - the Science and Psychology of Kindness* by Matthieu Ricard that sum up what is wrong with our world. "To change what we do because something is going to happen in one hundred years is, I would say, profoundly weird."

This was a comment made by the American magnate Stephen Forbes on Fox News regarding the rising levels of the oceans. And the head of the largest meat company in the US expressed the same kind of egocentric attitude even more openly: "What matters is we sell our meat. What will happen in fifty years is none of our business."

Both statements are examples of the widespread thinking of *Homo Economicus* - the individualistic, self-interested, so-called rational person – and a result of more than 200 years of promoting individualism as a philosophical, moral, social and political stance. The philosophy of individualism holds that the needs of each person are more important than the needs of the whole society or group. It strives for freedom from any kind of obligations imposed by religious, social, or governmental institutions and demands that the individual has the right to promote their own interests, without having to take the interests of society into consideration.

Individualism goes hand in hand with the belief that all our deeds, words and thoughts are motivated by selfishness. This view has become a kind of dogma, to the extent that a selfish motivation is attributed even to the most altruistic actions. Many scientists, psychologists and philosophers have argued that there is no such thing as pure altruism.

However, there is no doubt that most people do care about the wellbeing of future generations and do not want to leave a polluted, impoverished planet to those who come after us. There is also no doubt that throughout history, human beings have displayed an incredible ability for cooperation, goodness, benevolence, a willingness to contribute to the common good at their own cost, empathy, compassion and selflessness to the point of complete self-sacrifice.

Contrary to what the relentless onslaught of shocking news often presented in media headlines seems to suggest, many studies show that when a natural catastrophe or some other kind of tragedy occurs, mutual aid is more the rule than everyone-for-themselves, sharing more common than pillaging, calm more than panic, caring more than indifference, courage more than cowardice.

Even 1.8 million years ago we demonstrated the ability to care for each other as the discovery of a hominid skull at the Dmanisi site in Georgia demonstrates: the skull had only one canine tooth, having lost the other teeth very early. However, the man managed to live till the age of 45 and it is clear that in order to survive that long, the group must have taken care of him and others must have chewed his food. There really is no doubt that we have a natural and innate potential for kindness.

There are also countless examples of empathy, cooperation and self-sacrifice amongst animals: a tortoise turning other upended turtles back on their feet, a monkey rescuing his electrocuted friend, dolphins protecting humans from sharks, baboons rescuing an antelope from a leopard, a sparrow reanimating an unconscious fellow sparrow - just go on the internet and see the dozens of examples for yourself.

The point is not whether the existence of altruism can be proven beyond any doubt or not. Intention is by its nature impossible to prove – how can one 'prove' that someone acted without any selfish intentions? The real point is that we humans can choose whether we want to act in a selfish or in an unselfish way. We all have the choice to only think of ourselves or of others as well. As Martin Luther King put it: "Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness."

Selfishness is at the heart of most of the problems we face today. Only our willingness to act with responsibility and consideration for the interests of 'the other' or 'the whole' will enable us to solve these problems. To cultivate our innate potential for altruism has become a necessity.

Sabine Leitner

THE UNIVERSE AS AN ANSWER¹

We often speak about the stars, the planets, the animals, the sky, earth, water or snow, and we forget the real sense and meaning of the word Universe. Man asks himself questions about the whole of Nature, of which he himself is a part, but he tends to lose the central idea to which it refers.

'Universe' means that which is going in a single direction, so what we must discover is where it is going. This was perhaps one of the first approaches that humanity had. All the ancient civilisations asked themselves, through their religions, their metaphysics and their philosophies, where the universe is going and why; but the new materialistic-type ways of seeing things, especially in the post-Cartesian age, present us with a different point of view, and then man begins to analyse the characteristics of the universe, its size, form and weight.

Man claims to know the universe, because he has given names to the stars and measured the distance from the Earth to the Moon; or because he knows the list of chemical elements and the characteristics of the physical forces, and yet, in that detailed kind of knowledge, although there has been a specialisation of knowledge in each of the areas, these areas have become increasingly separate from one another.

In mineralogy, for example, we are taught the different characteristics of the rocks and the orogenic movements that have brought about changes to the Earth's surface; but we are not taught about the fundamental meaning of material things.

Let us suppose that we pick up any object and drop it suddenly; we will see that it falls and always looks for the lowest place; there is always a natural

attraction between this little piece of matter and that big piece of matter where we are. This material attraction is untiring.

What can we extract, then, from the nature of the mineral world? We can extract a tenacity, a search for destiny; and which of us can say that we share with the stones that search for destiny? In general, when we meet a difficulty, we tend to fight it for a while, and if the difficulty does not give way, we give way. The things of Nature, the stones, for example, have the tenacity of being beyond time and of always looking for their final destination.

Our children are taught the different characteristics of plants, about the process of photosynthesis, but it is not mentioned that, beyond every phenomenon of light absorption and conversion into energy, exists the capacity of the plant to know how to wait and to know how to grow. A little seed, buried in the earth in winter, under the snow, patiently awaits the advent of spring. When it arrives, that little seed rises up and seeks the air and the sun. It is another teaching of tenacity, of verticality and from a philosophical point of view, we are interested in the ultimate direction of the action of things.

We also have water; wherever we pour it, water will run off in search of the sea and there, in the sea, it evaporates, rises up again, condenses and becomes part of a great cycle again. The universe has a purpose.

Obviously, in the new characteristics of the recent centuries, alienated by material things, with a psychology of production and consumption, Man has forgotten the natural elements and how to interpret them. The ancients did not ask themselves so efficiently, perhaps, about the distance between the Earth and the Moon, but they tried to understand

(1) Editor's note: This article is a transcript of a lecture given by the author in Madrid in January 1976.

what the Moon signifies in the Universe. Through ancient sciences like astrology and others, they tried to interpret the natural phenomena and see in what way they were connected with this phenomenon which is called Man. And that gave the man of antiquity the sensation of being accompanied by intelligent beings, and of being himself an intelligent being.

Our present problem is that we feel isolated in the midst of the universe, in other words, since we are so much in contact with artificial elements, we have lost the ability to seek a purpose in things, and the dramatic part of this is that we have lost the possibility of finding a purpose in our own lives. As we live only from instant to instant, we have lost a teleological sense of life, of our ancestral roots and of the purpose that life has. And in this way we become beings of a moment, subject to time, feeling certain that we have been created by chance and that we are going to disappear at any moment; and this subconscious thought overwhelms us and harms us. Instead of trying to interpret Nature, we try to create a series of intermediary elements which are absolutely artificial.

The leaves of trees have their respiratory pores on the lower part; why not on the upper part? Simply because the dust would cover them. By being on the lower part, they are saved and can breathe. Is this chance?

Is it chance that the colour of butterflies' wings blends in with the flowers and the foliage so that the birds cannot catch them? Is it chance that the tips of owls' wings are smooth, so that they do not make any noise in their nocturnal flight and are thus able to catch the rabbits by surprise? Is it chance that those rodents have their ears pointing backwards, so they can capture the slightest sound of any predators that might be coming in their pursuit? Is it the number of colours into which the spectrum is divided when it is touched by white light also chance? Is the way in which we classify sounds also by chance?

It is obvious that the entire universe is co-ordinated in such a way that it has a wholeness about it, a kind of pyramidal sense of existence, where things, even though they are multiple, are going in search of a single end; they are all going towards the encounter of a single thing and they are all governed by a single intelligence.

In the Second World War, aviators understood that it was good to fly their planes in the V formation, whereby the plane at the front is replaced from time to time by those at the back; it has been demonstrated that this increases the speed of the squadron. Ducks and geese fly all together in the form of a great V, which works in such a way that the strongest is the one which is in the middle and the others are benefited by its slipstream.

We cannot think that all of this happens by chance. It took man centuries to be able to understand it.

We could give many examples showing how nature is designed. We cannot assert that the sum of all



these incidents is mere chance, on the contrary, we have to recognise that the universal intelligence has planned everything. And if we accept this universal planning, we would have to ask ourselves why, for what purpose? It is inconceivable that everything is planned for no reason, it is more logical to think that it has been designed for a purpose; and if it has been designed, it is good to try to discover what answer the universe can give us, for what purpose it was designed, where we are all headed, where we come from and where we are going.

There are seven principles or seven fundamental laws, in accordance with the natural divisions of the whole universe.

1. The first principle, the highest of all the principles of Nature, is the principle of unity. The whole of Nature is co-ordinated, in other words, it forms a vital unity and nothing is excluded from it. When things are alive, they do not destroy others,

but make possible the life of all. When the wolf pursues the deer on the steppe, it does not catch the youngest, but the oldest, the sick one, the one which could transmit its illness to the rest of the herd. In other words, even what seem to us to be acts of destruction, what might seem to be acts of cruelty, are made in such a way that the species can be perpetuated.

There are no doubts in Nature, no dialogues of oppositions. Everything is given perfect expression and is going in a single direction.

2. The second principle is that of illumination; All things in Nature have that principle, whether it is a physical or a spiritual illumination. The realities exist, but they need an intellectual or spiritual light to enable us to distinguish them, and when we sometimes say that there are no truths, that there is nothing on which we can rely, that we are alone, it is because we are in darkness and we need to rediscover the principle of illumination.



3. This principle brings as a consequence the third one, which is differentiation. All things in Nature are differentiated. There are no two things that are absolutely equal, or the same. This principle exists even though sometimes we may not see it; all things are different; even the grains of sand that we step on on the beach and that seem to be all the same are not the same. If we look at them attentively

with a magnifying glass, we will see that each of them has its little difference, its little characteristic. Hence, we have to be careful when using the words sameness or equality. We can be equivalent, but not equal; we can be similar, but not equal; and that does not separate or divide, it does not destroy human beings; it enriches them, like a mosaic of different colours which can have similar tones, but are never exactly the same. The concept of equality is a human invention; in Nature equality does not exist.

4. The fourth principle is the principle of organisation. Things are organised; we all see a tree, a solid trunk that rises above the earth and supports a tree-top full of branches and birds' nests; but we do not see another inverse tree-top which lies beneath the earth and which also with its wooden branches supports all the rest and sinks deep into the earth; and although it has no birds, it has worms and insects, and nourishes everything. In other words, everything is perfectly organised, everything is designed in such a way that there is support and cooperation between one thing and another. And the mistakes we humans tend to make are due to a lack of organisation.

Organisation is not a massification, it is not the imposition of some people over others; organisation is supportiveness. The hands are opposite and yet they organise themselves to pick something up; if we had our two hands on the same side, we would have difficulty in picking anything up. So, it is necessary to recognise this principle of organisation, even when we are opposed in something. This principle allows us all to work together, without ceasing to be who we are; this is something we should apply in our lives, in the here and now.

5. There is a fifth principle, the principle of causality. All things are the cause of something that follows them and the effect of what went before them, all of us descend from something and give rise to something: anything, taken at any point, is the result of something and the cause of something else, even apparently inanimate things. Nothing is only a cause or only an effect, they are linked together. From day comes night, from night comes day.

6. The sixth principle, that of vitality, tells us that all things are alive. Absolutely everything. Until the 19th century and the first half of the 20th, people used to speak about living beings and inanimate objects. Still today, due to inertia, we continue to repeat this because we say that something is alive when it

moves or when it flies or when it grows. Since the beginning of the world things have not only been alive when they act, they are also alive when they resist. All things are in constant movement, even if we cannot see the molecules or the atoms revolving in the air, which make up our hands, our bones. Everything is penetrated by vitality; this vitality which in the East is called "prana", a life that enters into all things, that never stops, so that even the things which we call dead are not dead, they have simply changed condition, shape, or way of living.

7. Finally we have the principle of periodicity. Since we were born we have noticed that in Nature there is an alternation between night and day, summer and winter, and so many other states which in this way oppose one another and alternate with one another; and yet, we do not realise—until we read Plato, until someone teaches us or until we ourselves awaken to that reality—that we, too, are within that periodicity. All these cycles include a great cycle which we call human life. But why stop there? Why not understand that this human life is a short day of wakefulness within a great life? That after this physical life there is a spiritual life and that it is like a dream, and that then we will have a physical life and a spiritual life.

The law of cycles embraces all things and never stops, everything is cyclic: the planets revolve cyclically in the sky, and the tiny particles also move within the atoms.

This periodicity allows life to be continuous and pulsating. We have to try to take from Nature what is not easily destructible. We have to look after something, not only our physical part, but the other parts, too. Because, to what extent do we look after our psychological part? To what extent do we give food to our mind, every day? To what extent do we have spiritual food? We have to look after our dreams. We have reached such a point of materiality that we take care that a jug or a car does not get broken, but what about a dream, a hope, an effort? What happens with the crystal birds of our dreams when they are broken? They are smashed to pieces and injure our hands.

We need to have the courage to pulverise our broken dreams, and with that glass dust of our dreams, to create new birds. It is time that we understood that we do not just have to drag ourselves through the world as if we were tortoises or snakes, but we have to learn to fly with the power of wings.

Philosophy is not mere speculation; it is not to sit in a corner and watch life pass by, nor is it a discipline of sorrows and withdrawal. Philosophy is to have a strong attitude in front of life, it is to understand the spirit of things, it is to be able to conquer the fear within ourselves, to conquer death, to be able to connect with others, with the deeper part of everyone. Because we do not see each other; sometimes it is said that when Man dies he passes into the invisible world; however, Man is always invisible; he is behind the things he does, behind his own body, his own words, his own acts. Man is a great question, a great enigma.

The answer lies in this very universe in which we live. It is written on the walls of history and on the walls of this universe that surrounds us. We simply have to learn to read it. It is a natural attitude, it is not against any creed or statement. It is to return to Nature.

We have discernment and yet we lack it in many things; who wants a car that only works from time to time? No one. And yet we accept ideas that are sometimes good and other times not, principles that apply sometimes and sometimes not, honesty which applies sometimes and sometimes not. We have to go back to having that common sense that we use on the physical level. In the spiritual part we have to go back to requiring from ourselves, from the world around us, absolute values that are easy to understand, to handle, to assimilate, that allow us to have an exact understanding of the universe.

We need a new science, a science that will move away from the vice of vested interests, a science in which there is no sense of violence. We need art that will allow us to be united once more with beauty, which is not based on anguish, but on true investigation. We need a politics that can lead men to live together in harmony and to be elevated, rather than leading us into conflicts or artificial coexistence. We need, in short, a New World. But this world already exists: it is the universe itself, it is Nature. The only thing we have to do is to live intensely the moments which destiny has offered us. To be like a key which is inserted into the lock of the universe and springs open the door of history, to pass to another dimension, to pass into that world which is awaiting us, that world which must be not only new, but better.

*Jorge Angel Livraga,
Founder of New Acropolis International*

The Curse of the Poisoned Soil

Soil is the uppermost part of the Earth's crust, the ground of human civilization. It is one of the most crucial parts of our ecosystem. The home of minerals, nutrients, insects and other animals, our food is produced in the soil. Only half of it contains solid materials, while the other half is filled with gas and water. The soil not only produces the components that are necessary for the survival of plants, animals and humans, but also neutralizes contaminants and impurities. It is a living, organic part of the Earth, full of life. Humans are bonded to the soil and highly dependent on it. In history, civilizations flourished and declined thanks to the availability and

productivity of the soil. In India, for example, soil moisture deficits, triggered by poor rainfall and high temperatures, caused droughts and famines between 1873 and 1943, killing millions of people.

The growing population of the Earth has required intensive mass production of crops and vegetables. Forests were destroyed, big monocultures appeared, fertilizers were used to create better productivity. In the last century, especially in its later decades, land was used and abused, with the result that the rich, life-giving part of the soil has been shrinking and disappearing. The soil is becoming just a dead skeleton without minerals, germs or insects. When there are no more living



creatures in it that can convert the components to nutrients, we have to apply artificial liquids that can help the soil to be productive. With this solution mankind technically just imitates what Nature could do for free, but for a lot of money. Fertilizers mean big business and large sums of money can be asked for them. But the destruction they cause has a long-term effect. Intensive cultivation, together with intensive fertilization is exhausting the soil. Normally, the topsoil is more than 100 cm deep, but overused soils generally have a topsoil depth of only 15-20 cm. It takes decades for Nature to create a rich, productive soil. Mankind can destroy it within a few years. What could the solution to this problem be?

For centuries, before the mass production of the 20th century, agriculture was generally eco-friendly and land was regarded as a precious gift from Nature. Even in ancient times, as in the Middle East, when chemical fertilization was unknown, farmers recognized that rotating crops or leaving the land fallow made it possible to restore or maintain productive soil. For example, under the two-field rotation system half of the land was planted, the other half was left fallow. Later, from the Middle Ages until the 20th century, the three-field rotation system was used, which means that land was divided into three parts. One part was planted in the autumn with rye or winter wheat, and oat or barley in the spring, the other part was used for growing crops, like peas, and the third section was left fallow. With this technique, productivity increased significantly, while the soil had time to reproduce the nutrition and minerals it provides.

Nowadays, some experts in the field say we must return to the old, chemical-free methods to keep the soil alive, otherwise we will have to face famine within decades. According to the UN, with the current soil loss, the world has 60 years of

harvest left. Because of the degradation of the soil, and the loss of groundwater, yields are constantly declining on 20% of the world's croplands. Apart from the fast-growing population, eating habits also boost the overuse of the soil. As more and more people eat meat, a large proportion of the planted crops goes to feed livestock. Many rainforests are destroyed for the sake of land to grow crops for animals. Only 0.01m² of land



is needed to produce a gram of protein from beans or peas, but 1m² to produce it from beef cattle or sheep: it is a 100-fold difference. The shift in our diet is inevitable: we should reduce meat consumption and go back to a more plant-based diet. Even artificial meat is a solution, as it reduces water use by more than 80% and land use by almost 100%. Now is the time to change our habits by ourselves before Nature forces us to do so.

Istvan Orban

Plato's Esoteric Teachings

Plato is typically thought of as a 'respectable' Greek philosopher who is widely taught at universities around the world and admired for his original philosophical thinking. However, there is another side to Plato which is only explored by a minority of scholars, starting with Heinrich Gomperz in the 1930s and continuing with the 'Tübingen School' of today. In many of Plato's works, the philosopher makes reference to oral traditions going back to Pythagoras and the Orphic Mysteries, and for some researchers, such as Savvas Pattakos (*Plato's Secret Doctrine, 1998*), these teachings form the main element in Plato's life and work. In this article I would



A depiction of Orpheus, Roman mosaic.

like to highlight some of these esoteric elements, particularly as they are found in the myths and allegories that punctuate his dialogues.

The Myth of Er: Life after Death and Reincarnation

This myth appears in Book 10 of *The Republic*. In it he describes the near-death experience of a Greek warrior who was wounded in a battle and travelled with the souls of his dead companions to the otherworld. He describes temporary heavens and hells where the souls of the just and unjust go; after a time, the souls are brought together again and led to a 'hall of destinies' where they can choose from a number of possible lives on the basis of their innate wisdom or ignorance. Then, after crossing a desert and drinking from the river of forgetfulness, they are reborn into their chosen life on Earth. Because they have drunk from that river, few souls remember that they have lived before or understand the meaning and purpose of their lives. The same theme of reincarnation appears in his dialogue *The Phaedo*.

The Myth of the Giants and the Origin of Love

Another interesting strand of myth in Plato is that which speaks of the esoteric history of humanity. As we can read in H.P. Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine*, according to Eastern esotericism humanity has evolved through many forms over a long period of time. At one time (as we find confirmed in countless myths from around the world), we were 'giants' and these giants were 'hermaphrodite'

or 'androgynous' and did not reproduce in the same way as we do. At some point in the long distant past, according to these esoteric traditions, humanity divided into two sexes, the present mode of sexual reproduction began and the giants diminished gradually in size.

In Plato's myth, told in his dialogue *The Symposium*, he says that in the past humans were not as they are now; they were much larger, spherical in shape and hermaphrodite, having the two sexes within them. Becoming proud of their strength, they decided to storm heaven and rule in place of the Gods. To reduce their strength, Zeus cut them in half, with the result that they became smaller and now only had one sex within them, becoming either male or female. As a result, human beings are now constantly looking for their 'other half'.

The Myth of Atlantis and the Great Flood

In another work, *The Timaeus*, and its sequel, *The Critias*, Plato touches upon another esoteric account of human evolution – the myth of Atlantis, a continent that was destroyed in the Great Flood (which also appears throughout world mythology). He describes a technologically advanced civilization that existed long before historical Egypt and Greece had come into being and says that there have been many destructions and reconstructions in the long history of humanity.

The Creation of the Universe

In the *The Timaeus*, Plato also gives a highly esoteric account of the creation of the world, which is based on mathematics, as in the Pythagorean system. Amongst the many interesting features of this dialogue is the idea that Time was designed by the Creator as 'a moving image of Eternity.'

There are many other myths and esoteric teachings to be found in Plato's works, such as the Chariot of the Soul in *The Phaedrus*, which explains how we humans fell into matter and how we have all knowledge within us (Plato's theory of 'reminiscence'); or the famous Allegory of the Cave, which appears in Book 7 of *The Republic* and describes the journey of the philosopher as he emerges from the darkness of ignorance into the light of wisdom, reminiscent of that well-known Eastern maxim: "Lead me from darkness to light", which could be said to sum up the whole of esoteric philosophy.

Let us hope that, as research into this aspect of Plato's writings continues, more and more light may be shed on the subject, so that this important part of Plato's teaching will enter mainstream university education and benefit a new generation of philosophy students.

Julian Scott



Tutankhamun *in London*

Probably the most famous of ancient Egypt's pharaohs today, Tutankhamun was a small and short-lived king, who reigned for only ten years and died at the age of 18, in marked contrast to the later Ramses the Great, who reigned for 66 years and died in his nineties.

Tutankhamun (1342 - 1325 BC) was one of the last pharaohs of the 18th dynasty, who lived during a period of theological and political

turmoil. His father, the pharaoh Akhenaton (1352 - 1336 BC), also called the heretic pharaoh, tried to change the ancient polytheistic Egyptian religion into a monotheistic one, venerating the god of the sun disk, Aten. At Akhenaton's death the priests of the god Amon in Luxor re-established the old ways through his son Tutankhaten, who was renamed Tutankhamun.

The discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb by Howard



Carter in 1922 was a miracle for many reasons. The location was unexpected and discovered by chance by a local water carrier. The tomb is also an amazingly preserved time capsule of ancient Egypt. Most tombs had been looted and left with only the paintings and carvings on the wall to tell their story, whereas the tomb of Tutankhamun contained over 5,000 perfectly preserved artefacts, including the pharaoh's intact mummy, which is now back in his tomb in the Valley of the Kings.

An exhibition currently showing at the Saatchi Gallery in London offers an enchanting introduction to the life and beliefs of the ancient Egyptians, with hundreds of artefacts on display. Usually, to be able to see them you would have to travel thousands of miles to Cairo.

The layout of the exhibition is wonderfully done, allowing you to immerse yourself in a different time and space: a time when the invisible was made visible in the most exquisite ways; a time when the gods, divine expressions of the laws of nature, would meet human beings and teach them. It was the role of the pharaoh and the high priest to transmit those teachings and ensure that Maat, the principle of universal order and justice, would be followed in Egypt.



Tutankhamun's alabaster canopic chest



The tomb of Tutankhamun also gave us a complete description of the burial and mummification process, as all the canopic jars, in which the organs of the pharaoh were preserved, and the various sarcophagi in which the mummy was encased, were found intact.

Walking through the exhibition, one becomes aware of the importance that the ancient Egyptians gave to the divine and the afterlife. One of the first things a pharaoh did after he was crowned was to start work on the construction of his tomb. But the tomb was never meant to be discovered or displayed, as it was designed to work in the invisible world, allowing the Pharaoh to pass successfully through the gates of the underworld and perhaps also to continue serving and protecting Egypt after his death (there are too many theories on the function of the Egyptian tombs to go into here). For the ancient Egyptians the most important things in life were to be found in the invisible dimension, that of the sacred and the divine; and for them a life was well lived if it prepared them for death and the afterlife. Perhaps something for us to learn from this fascinating civilisation, as we rush here and there always focused on external things.

Florimond Krins

Human Symbiosis with Plants



Over the course of time, there has been a progressive coevolution between plants and humans, with domestication possibly playing an integral role in this symbiosis. Some anthropologists propose that, before plant domestication began, carnivorous hunter gatherers had to seek alternative options during droughts, subsequently tapping into the seasonal cycles, and would

have started remembering where particular plants grow, discerning signs when best to eat, and what plants would elicit certain physiological and psychological responses. Humans would eventually have learnt cultivation techniques to meet their requirements, creating a mutual dependency.

If we scale down the metric of planet Earth's origins from 4.6

billion years to just 46 years, land plants would have existed for nearly 3 weeks, dinosaurs going extinct nearly 3 days ago and human beings arriving in the last 4 hours. In the last minute, we would have moved from hunter gatherers and foragers to converting over 35% of the Earth's land surface into farms, domesticating plants for many purposes such as

food, clothing and construction materials.

It could be easy to assume, with humanity's ability to transform the planet's landscape through civilisations, industry and technological advances, that humans possess advantageous capabilities over other life, being the alpha inhabitants of Earth.

However, as estimated by archaeological data, land plants have been around for approximately 470 million years longer than humans. The adaptations, sophistication and phenomena that plants have exhibited to survive is an operation worthy of acknowledgement. Just because plants are unable to write poetry, manufacture electronic devices or take photographs, it doesn't necessarily mean that a plant's dimensions of intelligence are inferior to our own. We are descendants, standing on the shoulders of a giant plant evolution. The late ethnobotanist and author Terence McKenna once said: "Animals are something invented by plants to move seeds around. An extremely yang solution to a peculiar problem which they faced."

Whether said in jest or not, our reliance on plants is incontestable: the oxygen we breathe, the carbon sequestration, medicine, sustenance, shelter, clothing and so on. Throughout the ages, humans have certainly been active participants in seed and specimen distribution around the world, providing sanctuary and preservation to endangered species, via seed banks and botanical centres such as Kew Gardens in London.

Some of the earliest recorded domesticated crops were fig trees, flax, wheat and peas, dating as far

back as the 9th millennium BCE. These findings were located in an area known as "The Fertile Crescent", which stretched from the Nile to the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in the Middle East. Without agriculture, it is unlikely we would have created civilisations, as it freed up people's time to develop in other ways, rather than having to prioritise their focus on foraging and hunting.

The symbiosis between humans and plants can also be seen in the molecular composition of plants, mimicking vital human metabolites. Although for thousands of years we have known of plant medicines and their effects, it is mainly since the 20th century that the pharmaceutical industry has been able to isolate and patent compounds, synthetically manufacturing drugs through such discoveries.

In the 18th century, pioneering botanist Carl Linnaeus was a pivotal figure, revolutionising our relationship with plants through classification, as not knowing the names of things, our knowledge of them also perishes. Linnaeus believed nature's economy should be the foundations for our own. He said that an economist without knowledge of nature is like a physicist without knowledge of mathematics.

These words have great potency today, as for the last two centuries, especially since the British Agricultural Revolution commenced, our symbiotic relationship with plants has radically transformed into a false sense of ownership, with the exploitation of the planet's resources for capitalist demand.

Mass-scale industrialisation has replaced farmers and

natural practices with artificial interventions, using machinery, genetic modification, synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, all of which has been well documented for its unfavourable effects on the environment.

Farming methods like monoculture, which has created large-scale deforestation, eliminating ecosystems along with their biodiversity, cannot be managed without the intoxicating use of artificial means. For example, plants need diverse ecosystems to flourish as they cannot survive as a singular crop naturally. By removing trees, we are also removing a carbon sink, as well as vital shade for the soil; consequently, the land dries out and becomes barren, depleted of nutrients, which are the basis for any ecosystem.

Fortunately, in the last decade or so there has been increasing awareness of the need for more ethical and holistic practices, such as permaculture, biodynamic farming and agroforestry, to name a few, along with sustainable and recyclable alternatives to replace the likes of plastic production, mining and fracking. Whether they will be incorporated into global industry is another question altogether.

What Linnaeus might have been trying to say is, if we work with plants with reverence for their needs, they can cater naturally for our own. As exemplified in recent times, when we divert from a harmonious symbiosis, it can invite sickness and threaten not just plants, but life on the planet as a whole.

"The wisest and noblest teacher is nature itself." – Leonardo da Vinci.

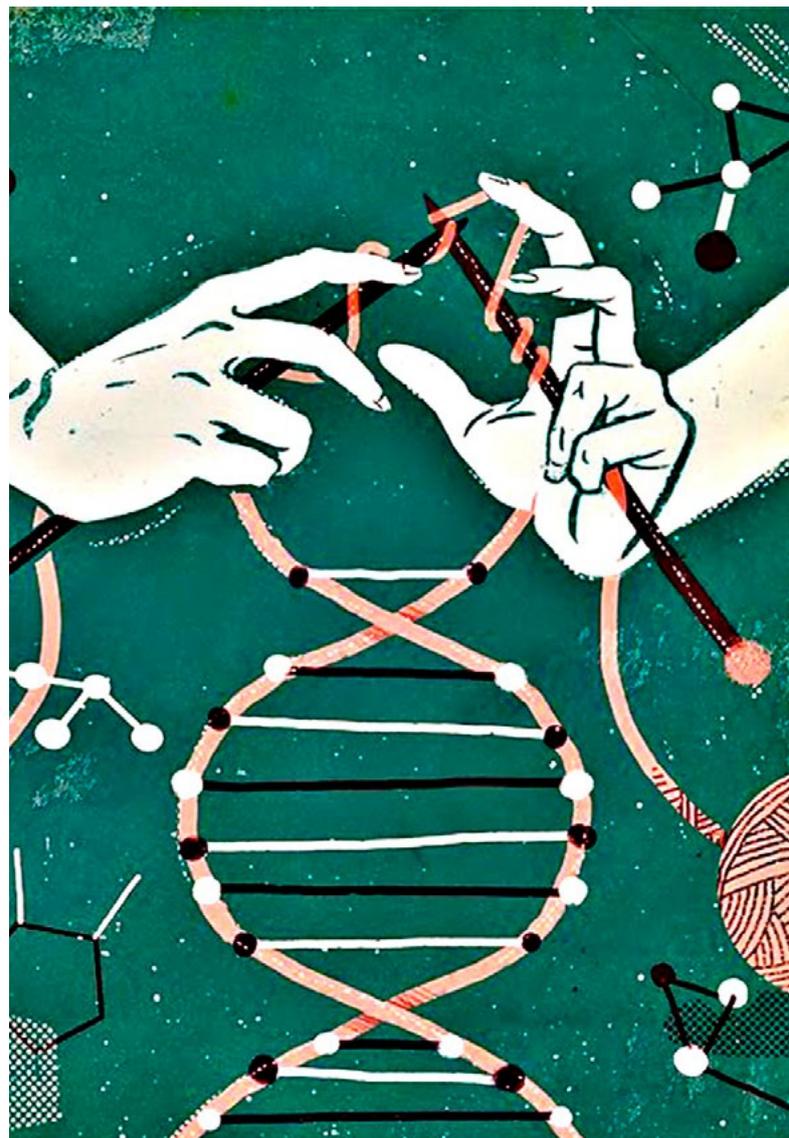
Gareth Kinsella

Epigenetics

Taking Responsibility for our Lives

Most scientists used to be convinced that living beings were simply the product of their genes and that we were predetermined and condemned to suffer by a genetic program inherited from our ancestors. The last 20 years of research in the life sciences have completely overturned this belief. They have shown that we can have an effect on our lives, transform ourselves, change our behaviours and go beyond our limits towards sometimes unsuspected horizons.

The research of Dr. Bruce Lipton (1) has revealed that the environment in which the cell membrane operates controls the behaviour and physiology of the cell, by activating and deactivating the genes. These discoveries have clashed with the opinion of the majority of contemporary scientists, who claim that life is controlled by the genes, and this controversy has turned epigenetic science into one of the most important fields of study today.



Epigenetics is defined as the science that studies transmissible and reversible changes in the expression of the genes, which are not accompanied by a change in the genetic medium, in other words, changes that do not alter the DNA. Such changes can occur spontaneously or as a result of stress, as a response to an environment or other external factors. Epigenetic phenomena act like switches, which turn the genes on and off, depending on circumstances and in different degrees. They therefore allow many unprogrammed combinations between genes to occur, through the phenomenon of methylation (2).

Although discoveries related to epigenetics are very recent, the term was coined in 1942 by Conrad Hal Waddington (3), from the Greek *epi*, meaning “above” (“above genetics”). Epigenetics is like a code over the code, as Joel de Rosnay explains very well in his latest book *The Symphony of the Living World* (4): it is a biological “meta-software” that profoundly changes the role of classical genetics. Epigenetic change is not a mutation, but a modulation of the expression of the genes by behaviour or the environment. Genetics and epigenetics are compared to the text of a book and the process of reading, in which every individual interprets the book in a different way, through

their own experience and imagination... Others compare genetics to a musical score and epigenetics to the interpretation of the symphony when it is performed. The big question is how to become the conductor of the orchestra of our own musical score.

What we experience influences our physical state, our psychological state, our life course and our mind, and plays an important role in the epigenetic modulation of the expression of the genes.

We inherit our genome, but we have the freedom to act on our epigenome, individually and collectively, and on the evolution of our society, through the interactions we choose to have with each other. Today, these interactions can be extended, for better or worse, through the use of social media. In the epigenetic world, everything is reversible, which emphasizes the importance of taking responsibility for our lives and

clarifying our choices. Our behaviour and our will to act can transform us. With epigenetics, we can redirect the negative “psychosomatic” processes in ways that will benefit our health and our mental balance.

The five key words for a successful reorientation are nutrition, exercise, anti-stress, pleasure and harmony. They are all interrelated and require a discipline of life that the ancient philosophers of East and West, who were interested in the mutual influences between mind and body, recommended as preventative approaches.

Current studies demonstrate that the ancestral practices of meditation, yoga, forms of dynamic meditation such as Tai Chi and Qi Gong can have positive effects on the metabolism of our body and on some dysfunctions such as high blood pressure. Thanks to these studies, ancient wisdom and new discoveries have found a point of convergence.



Today we know that all these techniques for the relaxation of the body and the regulation of breathing allow us to reach a high level of both concentration and relaxation. There have also been claims that patients suffering from cancer, when they practised these techniques alongside a healthy nutrition, were able to modify their cancerous cells and restore them to a normal state. Recent

modulation of the expression of our genes. So, being surrounded by true friends or living a stable emotional life and flourishing internally can only have beneficial effects, not only on our physical health, but also on our health in general.

Dawson Church (5) describes how our mental state influences our genes. He demonstrates that factors such as beliefs, intentions, meditation, altruism, optimism,

individually; we also need to change the way we live together. To do this, we need to reconnect with higher aims, as Arnaud Beltrame demonstrated with his self-sacrifice in the terrorist attack of 2018 (6). The whole nation was united in its gratitude to Beltrame and other heroes. He was able to face the challenge that lies before us all: to find the delicate balance between liberty and security. His example enabled us to become aware that other approaches are possible and that we should never bow to fate.

*Fernando Schwarz, Director
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studies have also shown that, in situations of great stress, such as in the case of victims of the Holocaust or famine, genetic modifications can be inherited for generations by those who did not live those experiences, although today we know that reversal is also possible.

Therefore, nutritional habits, physical activity, pollution, stress, worries, our social and family relationships and happy and unhappy events can influence our life course and our state of mind and play an important role in the epigenetic

cooperation and confidence have a consequent effect on the genes related to stress, which are especially involved in the processes of ageing and immunity.

In conclusion, the relationship we establish with our inner and outer environment is crucial in enabling us to transform ourselves and to make use of all the tools that can help us to raise our consciousness.

This is also a collective challenge. It is vital to understand that we cannot just change ourselves

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(1) Bruce H. Lipton (born 1944) is an American developmental biologist and a former researcher at Stanford University's School of Medicine. Lipton, Bruce H. *The Biology of Belief: Unleashing the Power of Consciousness, Matter and Miracles*. Hay House Inc., 10th Anniversary Edition, 2016. Lipton, Bruce H., Bhaerman, Steve. *Spontaneous Evolution: Our positive future and how to get from there to here*. Hay House Inc., 2010.

(2) Methylation is a chemical modification that consists of adding a methyl group (CH₃) to a substrate. In the DNA, methylation occurs when a methyl group is added instead of an atom of hydrogen to one of the four bases of nitrogen. In this way, that particular DNA sequence is turned off and can no longer produce proteins.

(3) A British developmental biologist, paleontologist and geneticist (1905-1975).

(4) Rosnay, Joel de. *La symphonie du vivant. Comment l'épigénétique va changer votre vie* Les Liens Qui Libèrent. 2018

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THE SPRING EQUINOX



Top: Sun rise on top of the middle tower at Angkor-temple. **Bottom:** Chichen Itza pyramid during the spring equinox—Kukulkan, the famous descent of the snake

We all are cheered by days full of the renewing energy of spring – a beautiful time when nature awakens, the days become longer and everything living rejoices.

There is a special time in the year when the Sun is exactly above the equator, hence the Earth's axis neither points toward nor away from the Sun and day and night are approximately 12 hours long everywhere on Earth. This is known as the equinox, which comes from the Latin "aequus" - "equal" and "nox" - "night". There are two equinoxes: spring (between 19 and 21 of March) and autumn (between 21 and 23 of September). Astronomically, in the northern hemisphere, spring starts from the moment of the spring equinox, after which the Earth's axis tilts toward the Sun and the days start to get longer than the nights.

The spring equinox is also a special festivity connected to the yearly cycle of the Sun and the renewal of nature, as well as to spiritual resurrection. Traditionally, the equinox and spring mark the renewal of the world and of life. It is the time when a hero or a god overcomes the darkness of the underworld or death and comes out into the light of life.

Thus, the Persian New Year festival of Nowruz falls exactly on the Spring Equinox. It is an old festivity with Zoroastrian roots. At the New Year, the world that was created in mythological time is reborn. It transforms from an aged, worn out world into a new one and reclaims its characteristics of life, light, health and fertility, as well as its order in accordance with the principles of a Cosmic Order.

In ancient Rome, before the times of Julius Caesar, the new year started in March and, during the spring equinox, the ancient Romans celebrated the Quinquatria – old Etruscan festivities honouring the goddess of wisdom Minerva. The Roman poet Ovid tells us that it was a celebration of

Minerva's birthday. Other authors mention that on that day in ancient times Minerva's temple on one of the sacred hills of Rome was consecrated.

In ancient Greece and Rome, there was another celebration connected precisely with the spring equinox – although it originally came from Phrygia – the mysteries of the Great Mother Cybele and her son Attis. The celebration lasted a whole week and it was on the spring equinox, Hilaria – the day of joy – that Attis was resurrected after his death.

According to Jewish tradition, God made the sun, moon and stars on the fourth day of creation. The Talmud explains that the Sun was created in its spring equinox position and returns to it every 28 years. There is a blessing that is recited every 28 years to express gratitude to the Creator for the Sun.

In Japan, at the time of both the spring and autumn equinoxes, Buddhist followers celebrate O-Higan. Etymologically, it

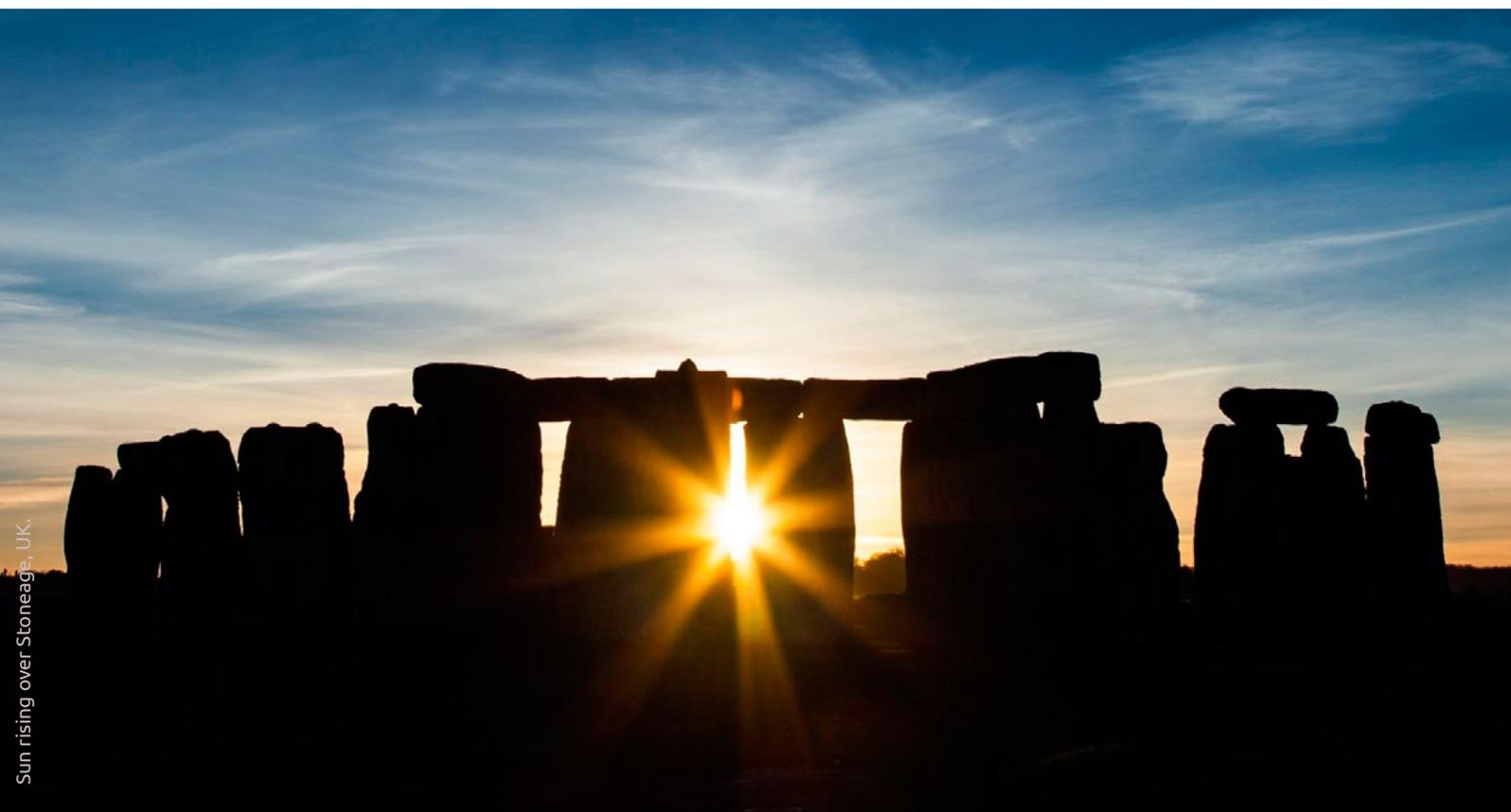
means “the other shore” and is a reminder of the impermanence of everything in this manifested world, and the need to cross the river of existence and reach the Pure Land of Bliss. In this way, it is connected with the spiritual move from the world of suffering to the world of enlightenment.

There are many more festivities in spring, calculated on the basis of the spring equinox and the lunar calendar. Among others we can mention the Celtic Beltane, the Babylonian New Year, Passover, Easter, the Tamil New Year and the Latvian Lieldienas.

All the abovementioned celebrations and many more connected with spring include different beautiful rituals, especially of purification, that help to manifest the sacred time of the festivity and enable us to reconnect with the meaning of that celebration.

As living parts of nature ourselves, let open our hearts to the spiritual sun and grow and blossom together with the spring.

Nataliya Petlevych



Sun rising over Stoneage, UK.

