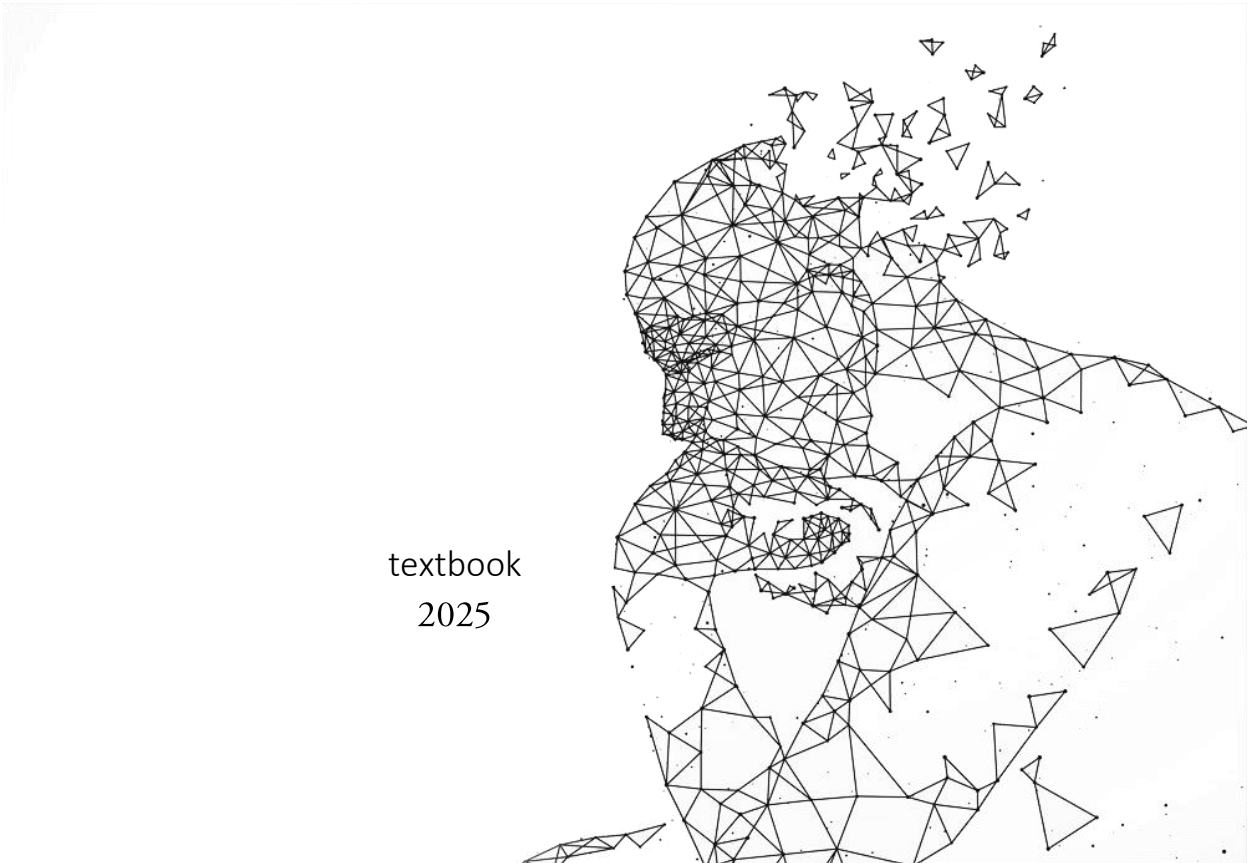
PHILOSOPHY

φιλοσοφία

فلسفة

PHILOSOPHIA

philosophie



textbook

2025

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This document was made using primary and secondary sources which are referenced in footnotes. As it is meant to serve as an introduction to the history of ideas, as well as to the views of a choice of important thinkers from the Western tradition, every section begins with a biography that contextualizes each philosophical approach. Unless indicated otherwise, all illustrations are taken from Wikimedia Commons.

CHAPTER 1

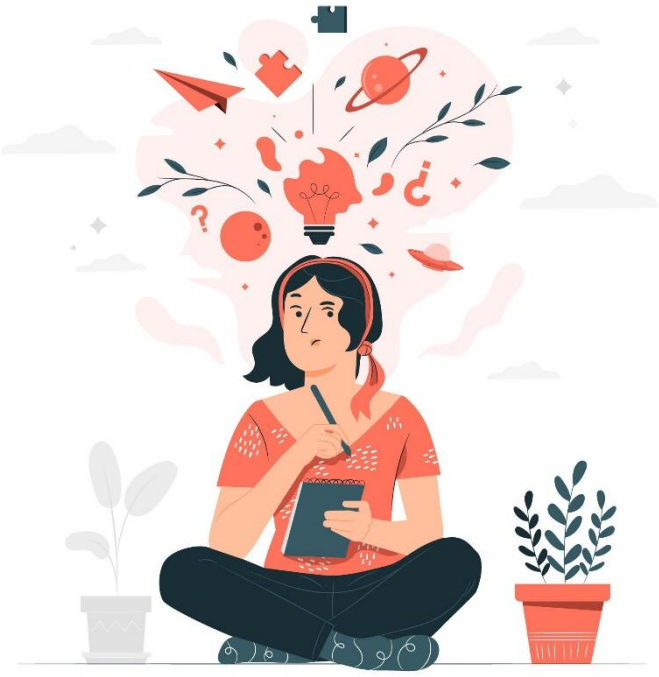
WHAT PHILOSOPHY CAN BE

A Love of Wisdom

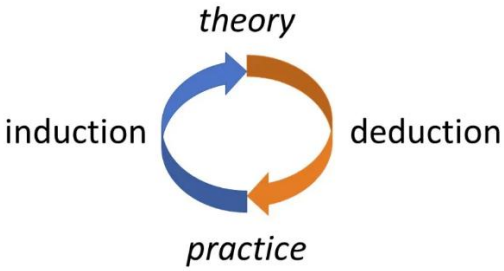
The word "philosophy" comes from the ancient Greek φιλοσοφία. It is composed of two words: φῐ́λος [*phílos*] meaning 'love, desire, friendship,' and σοφός [*sophós*], meaning 'skilled, proficient, wise'. It can be translated as *befriending wisdom*.

By extension, philosophy can be understood as the **aspiration to proficiency** and the **pursuit of knowledge**, in all domains. Indeed, many philosophers of the past have combined their philosophical research with the study of other subjects: mathematics, physics, zoology, medicine, politics, economics, rhetoric and so on. Moreover, wisdom is not limited to the exercise of the mind, but encompasses the whole of what we are as human beings: wisdom can grow from the exercise of the body, from looking for a healthy lifestyle, from learning how to interact with others, from any kind of job or occupation in which we would be looking to accomplish ourselves more fully.

Today, ancient and modern philosophical methods, resources and texts are used all over the globe to help/support/enhance the way people relate to their lives and activities. Anybody whose desire is to become proficient in their own field will, at one point, undertake a **reflection** about it. How can I get better at what I do? How should I act? What should be changed, or maintained? Since they express a desire for wisdom, such aspirations are 'philosophical' and aim at theory as well as practice.



The word "theory" comes from the Ancient Greek θεωρέω [*theōréō*], which means 'I look at, I consider, I examine.' When we **theorize**, we make a step back from the flow of life in order to have a different look at it. Theory, therefore, is the complementary aspect of "practice," a word that comes from the Ancient Greek πρᾶσσέω [*prâsséō*] which means 'I do.' When **practicing**, we do not stand back looking, we are immersed into the action that is at hand. That is also when we put our theories to the test: is the theoretical description we gave of reality accurate? Or do we need to look at it again, differently? What we learn when we act, we then use to produce a more accurate theory (a process called "induction"), and what we learn in theory, we then use to enhance our practice (a process called "deduction"). There is an endless circulation between these two poles, producing **experience**. To *befriend wisdom* is to be part of that process.



To say this, is at the same time saying something about what it means to be human. Indeed, whenever we think or act, we do it **as human beings**. Just like it is necessary to include the onlooker if we want to understand what is seen (e.g. human eyes do not perceive the same colours as the eyes of other animals), it is necessary to include the thinker if we want to understand what is thought. In that sense, we can say that every theory presupposes an anthropology (from the Ancient Greek ἄνθρωπος [*ánthrôpos*] which means 'human', and λόγος [*logos*] which means, 'studying,' 'reasoning upon'). In other words, every theory or practice implies a certain vision of what human beings are, what we are capable of, what we desire and how we envision the world.

Every human being observes and describes the world around them, and gives meaning to their actions – they make theories and tell stories – but how are we to understand this activity itself? What is a good theory? What is a good story? Is there a way to understand the world that would give better results, and make us happier? Philosophers have therefore attempted to theorize about theories, interrogating themselves about how the mind could be best used, thus interrogating themselves about what the mind is, and consciousness, in relation with nature and the universe.

As such, philosophy plays a variety of roles in opening pathways to orient and interrogate humans' judgements and actions. It can be in turn normative (how to be just and avoid wrong-doings / how to think correctly and avoid errors), speculative (what is this all about / what if we tried to look at it differently / why are we here), systematic (how does everything relate together in a structured and complete system), critical (what are the conditions, the potentials and the limits of our ability to know) and/or creative (the invention of new concepts that will allow for a different sense of reality to emerge).

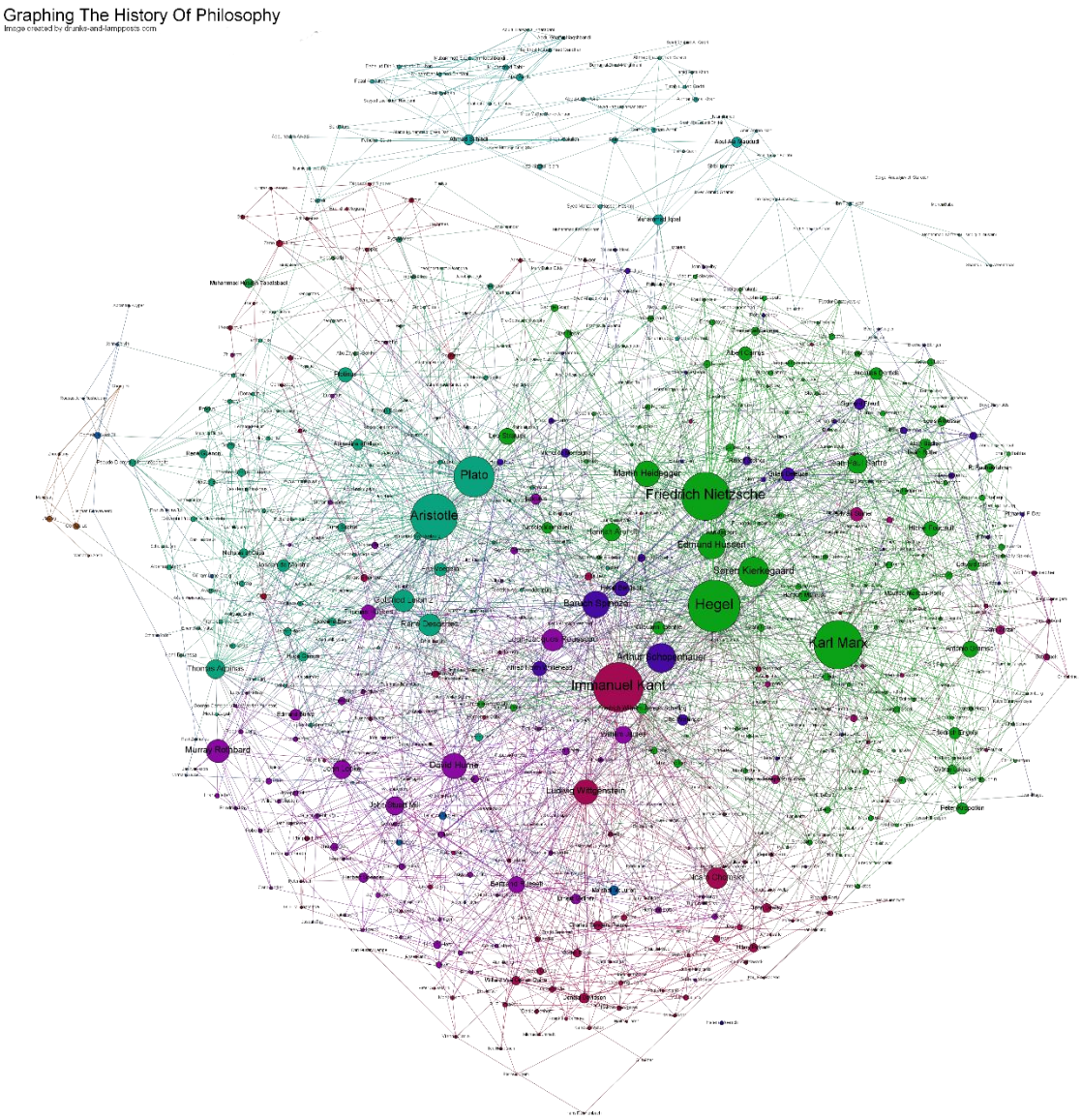
Philosophers Throughout the Ages

In the 5th and 4th centuries BCE – a period that is called *Classical Greece*, usually considered to be the summit of Greek civilisation and culture – the word *sophós* was used to qualify persons who had become experts in their art or craft, or, in a different sense, masters of themselves. In the 21st century CE, most people would use the word in a similar way, when qualifying a spiritual leader, a president or an old person as '**wise**,' because of their experience, and/or because of the authority of their position.

It is believed that Pythagoras (born in 580 BCE), and later Socrates, gave the word *sophós* a twist by prefixing it with the word 'phílos.' For them, a philosopher is not someone who 'is' wise, who possesses wisdom, but someone who is always *striving for* wisdom, living with *a desire for* wisdom. In other words, one cannot be wise, but only become wiser, more knowledgeable, more proficient in one's area of expertise. Because they ask many questions, philosophers have therefore often been adversaries to religious dogmas and common sense certainties, and have suffered the ire of priests, kings and crowds. Yet, at times, philosophers have also been prone to dogmatism (i.e. stating a "truth" and rejecting all questioning) and fallacies (i.e. believing something to be true even when experience and careful examination prove it false).

Moreover, we should keep in mind that many centuries have passed since the first Greek philosophers lived, and that the world has changed: some truths from the past might still be true today, while others we look at with surprise, asking ourselves how people could think in such ways. The meaning of life and of the role we, as humans, can play in it, is clearly related to our context, the society and times we live in, the people we interact with, the pain and pleasures we experience, the goals we want to achieve.

Looking for wisdom is often seen as a lonesome quest, while in fact it needs to be fuelled through **continuous dialogue and exchanges**. During Antiquity, most thinkers lived in communities or founded schools (e.g. Plato, Aristotle, Epictetus). They had disciples, some of which opened their own schools in turn or continued the works of their teachers. Other thinkers lived by themselves as antisocial loners (like Diogenes, who is said to have lived in a barrel and whose impertinence is legend), but they would still entertain a relationship with the world of their times. Even Pyrrho, a Greek philosopher who thought that knowledge was impossible and therefore should not be looked for, had followers. Later, during the medieval period, many thinkers were part of a religious congregation or attached to the first universities. With the invention of the printing-press in the 15th century, philosophical writings became much more accessible, and with the rapid and powerful growth of the academic centres in the 19th and 20th centuries, many philosophers have grown as part of such institutions. As of today, we find them wherever people are striving for knowledge and agency. It is proof enough that, while philosophy cultivates an attitude of independent thinking, it also needs the social circumstances of intellectual and cultural emulation in order to develop.



Some philosophers have had strong links with political power (e.g. Aristotle was the preceptor of Alexander the Great, Marcus Aurelius was a Roman Emperor, Boethius was counsellor to King Theodoric in Rome, etc.), some with the sciences (e.g. Pythagoras and Euclid are well-known for their theorems, Anaxagoras predicted eclipses, Democritus invented the concept of atoms, Descartes was famous during his lifetime for his treatises on optics and geometry, Leibniz invented differential and integral calculus, etc.), some with language and the arts (e.g. Aristotle wrote important theories on the theatre and poetics, Frege and later Chomsky on linguistics, Sartre and Camus wrote novels, Deleuze philosophized within the framework opened by literary works, paintings and cinema, etc.), some with religion (e.g. Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas were both canonized by the Catholic Church, the former monk Giordano Bruno was burnt alive by the Catholic Inquisition as heretic, Arthur Schopenhauer found his inspiration in ancient Buddhist texts, etc.), or with economics (e.g. Karl Marx produced the first full-scale theory of the capitalist mode of production), and so on.

In this regard, let's remember Aristotle's famous statement, that humans are **political animals**: they live in groups, they need each other in order to thrive. The word politics comes from the Ancient Greek πόλις, *polis*, which means 'city'.

It is also important to consider that people have always travelled and exchanged ideas. Migrations caused by wars, famine, slavery or tyranny, as well as commercial connections between different cities and parts of the world, produce cultural blending. **Influences travelled** from India to Egypt and from Persia to Greece, from Greece to the Arabic world, from the Islamic caliphate to the Christian kingdoms, from Africa to the Americas, from Asia to Europe and back again. Let us keep in mind that what we may call "Western philosophy" was born from this mix of populations and influences…

The history of philosophy is thus also **the history of ideas and their transmission**, through speech, writing and translation. While many documents were lost – because of wars (e.g. the Roman destruction of Athens in 86 BCE) or fires (e.g. the great library of Alexandria) – many others survived but remained sealed due to the lack of qualified translators. Errors of copy, bad translations and even falsifications made it all the more difficult to gain access to what someone had thought centuries earlier.

Yet, ideas did not only travel through the writings of philosophers, but have transpired through stories, poetry, political agendas and religion, through art, traditions, customs and legislations. If we look around us, if we listen to what people say, we might recognize sentences that are in fact more than 2000 years old. And with today's libraries and the internet, knowledge of a great many thinkers' works is at hand.

But at the crossroads of all that humans do, learning about philosophy and the history of ideas can only make sense if we learn at the same time *how to philosophize*.

What is a Philosophical Problem?

"What are the issues we face today?" To this question, most people would mention wars, climate change, growing inequalities, hunger and malnutrition, manipulations of the public opinion, corruption, pollution, and some others.

Why do we name them **issues**? Mainly because they affect human lives negatively and contain an element of controversy. Nobody seems to see an issue in the fact, for example, that we drink water from a glass. This tells us something as to how the common opinion understands the notion of "issue": we have an issue when we don't have what we need, when we undergo a loss, when we are at risk or suffer.

What we call a **problem** is something different, because it implies an intention of resolution through reflexivity. So that not only issues, but anything that in ordinary times we would not have questioned, can be put in such a focus. We can problematize, for example, the fact that we drink water from a glass, by questioning our relationship with resources, craftmanship, nutrition, or even aesthetics.

In order to problematize, we need first to feel concerned, by exploring how **we relate** to a situation on different levels. For example, if we were to suffer from water shortage, as a body we would feel the thirst, later the symptoms of dehydration; as a conscious being, we would ask ourselves what to do; as a person we would be worried about our family and more generally about our social group; as citizens we would look towards political institutions which have not been able to prevent the shortage or find a solution; as members of a culture, we would ask about our history and about our habits regarding water. And as humans, we would ask: how come human beings are unable to prevent such a disaster? From this example, we can conclude that one specific issue translates differently in each of the **relationships** that make up our lives. If we want to find a solution, we must think them all together and bring them forth as a problem.

There is another difficulty: all issues do not seem to concern us directly. Let us take again an example: is 'poverty' an issue that concerns us? If we are rich, then the issue does not concern us directly, and from this we can conclude that there is a sense of self-interest attached to every issue. But what if we noticed that the issue of poverty is linked to other issues? What if we translated issues from one category of relationships into another and connected the dots together? And what if, finally, we endeavoured to understand and find solutions for issues which are not in line with our own self-interest? What if we decided to **reach out**? This is the starting-point of a philosophical problem.

Yet another example: philosophers studied music, not to become good musicians themselves, but out of their love for music, or even out of sheer curiosity, to understand what music is. They did it so that others could reflect on their way of playing or listening to music; they did it to make sense of their own existence in a world where music exists. Starting with something that didn't seem to be a problem, they were able to question not only music, musicians and their public, instruments and techniques, but also our senses and cultural habits, the nature of sound and the laws of physics. Thus, for philosophy, to address a problem is first and foremost **to problematize** a reality.

This attitude makes it possible to think and act with all the more intensity, and that is probably why philosophers have been both praised and denigrated. Did they have the right answers? That is something that needs to be discussed in each particular case. What is certain is that their minds took roads that were **out of the ordinary**. The ones we name today pompously "great philosophers" were thinkers whose work marked a change in the way humans think about themselves and decide on how they would act. Although they were not directly responsible for the transformations that followed, their words were recognized by others as worthy of use, discussion and remembrance.

What is a Philosophical Concept?

In everyday life we use words such as "idea", "notion" and "concept" without a second thought. But what do we talk about? These words designate manifestations of thought.

We think, and when thinking we grasp at ideas, notions, concepts. In sentences like "I have an idea" or "do you see what I mean?", we address **our capacity to think**.

To talk about thinking we use a variety of words: mind, intellect, consciousness, soul, psyche, reason, brain—and in fact all these words have a different origin and history. They come from different languages ("psyche" comes from Greek, "intellect" and "consciousness" from Latin, "mind", "soul" and "brain" from Proto-German) and have been used to mean different things (the "intellect" can be understood as a part of a "soul" created by God, or as the result of the chemistry of the "brain"). It is therefore important to **define** what we mean when we use such terms, in order to facilitate understanding and be able to delve more accurately into the complexity of the real.

Philosophy is not only about thinking, since it addresses the whole human experience, but it uses **thought as one of its main instrument**. And like any instrument, one has to learn how to use it—a good philosopher thus being someone who uses their capacity to think with precision and purpose. In that respect, philosophy is a gymnastic of the mind, or, as Nietzsche famously wrote, a dance. Hence the necessity to stretch, warm up, exercise, through discussion and through reading, and through participating in a variety of human activities while reflecting on them. Anything can become an object of thought: nature, sport, art, education, politics, nutrition, agriculture, engineering, etc.

A **philosophical concept**, then, is nothing more than an idea, but an idea that has been worked on and given form. Any **philosophical concept** is thus connected to the specific geo-historical context during which it was thought. That is why, when studying philosophy, we use (when possible) the language into which a philosopher tried to formalise his thoughts. **Language** shapes thinking, and vice versa. Moreover, in order not to confuse a common notion (e.g. "truth") with how this notion was conceptualized by a philosopher (e.g. *truth* for Plato, or *truth* for Machiavelli), we name such concepts in their original language (e.g. the Greek word *aletheia* in Plato, or the Italian word *verità* in Machiavelli). This allows us to hear/understand something of how any given language colours and structures one's experience of reality. Thus, as much as possible, we try to learn a philosopher's language, read their works in the original and be careful whenever handling a translation, attentive at the gaps between **languages, intentions** (of the writer, of the reader) **and contexts**.

Philosophy today

All the above shows us that what is considered philosophical has changed over time. Over the centuries, the knowledge accumulated and made available has grown bigger and bigger, making it impossible for one person to encompass all there is to know. As a consequence, many **sciences**[1] have appeared in order to look into specific questions, each developing specific tools and perspectives. During Antiquity, every physicist was also a philosopher; but since the 17th century, scientists who study physics with their own

[1] The word "science" comes from the Latin *scientia*, from *scio*, 'I know'.

methods and looser ties to philosophy have appeared. The same goes for psychology, economy, sociology, art theory, etc. We live today in a world of specialists. Natural scientists and ecologists have the most accurate vision of climate change; economic theorists of the structural reasons behind poverty; physicists of the causes of matter's transformations; etc. So one could ask: what place is left for philosophy?

Firstly, to *philosophize* means cultivating the ability to reflect on what we are and what we do, actively developing our behaviours and understanding of the world. It means problematizing reality while questioning our intentions and methods.

Secondly, to *philosophize* in a world of specialists means questioning our ways of thinking, crossing the borders between the different fields and connecting disciplines, making them communicate so that synergies become possible.

Thirdly, to *philosophize* means asking the questions that have not been asked, that people do not see or do not want to see. It means looking for blind spots, disturbing a society's sense of normalcy, never accepting anything as self-evident.

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CHAPTER 2

Ontology & Epistemology

Philosophy begins with a sense of wonder: that we are here, that something exists. The first question, maybe the question from which philosophy originates, lies with the evidence that there "is" something and that we experience it.

When taking a look at the grammar of a sentence such as "we are here", we notice how it is built around the verb '**to be**', used more generally to signal an event or express a relationship. In sentences like "this is an apple," "the sky is blue," "I am hungry," "mathematics is difficult," "a cat is a feline," the verb 'to be' operates as a link between an object (e.g. the sky) and a quality (e.g. blue), creating a relation of identity.

But a sentence like "I am hungry" is only valid as long as "I" didn't eat dinner; after dinner, one would have to say "I was hungry but now I am not anymore." So what are we really saying, when we say "I was hungry" since this situation doesn't exist anymore? It may be valid grammatically—but is it valid as far as existence is concerned? In other words, does the past exist? Still now? And can we truly talk about it? The same goes about the future—and probably about the present. That is, if the present exists…

Let us ask then: what is '**is**'? What is this relation of identity that we express, when we say for example that the sky is blue? That 'there is' a sky? Is 'is' a product of our consciousness, of a certain behaviour of our brain cells? Or is it something else? What does this verb – and the way we understand the world through it – do for us?

From such questions was born a type of philosophical questioning that we call **ontology**. The word is composed of the Ancient Greek ὤν [*ṓn*] meaning 'being,' and λόγος [*lógos*] which can mean 'study,' 'speech,' 'reason,' 'relation,' and 'measure.' Ontology can thus be defined as the study of what being is.

Everything Flows

Heraclitus

Over the course of the 5th century BCE, two thinkers would have a lasting influence over the question of being: Heraclitus and Parmenides. Which one of them spoke first, and which one answered the other, is not clear; but it is assumed that they knew each other's theories. They probably knew them better than we do, actually, since their work has been lost. Lacking direct sources, we have to rely on the writings of commentators who copied a couple of lines here or an entire paragraph there. Therefore, despite all the careful analyses that have been made by generations of translators and scholars, it remains possible that we got it all wrong.

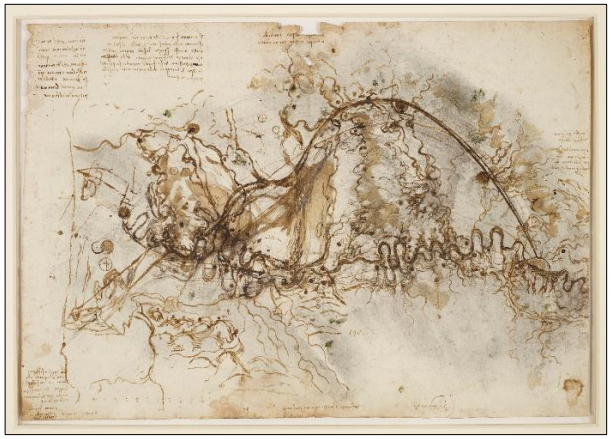
Heraclitus (c. 535 – c. 475 BCE) was born in Ephesus, in present-day western Turkey, on the border of the Aegean Sea, at the time a Greek colony that had been invaded by the Persians. He was born from a rich family, but aside from this little is known about his life, and much of the information that circulated during late Antiquity was invention. The same goes for his so-called "fragments": some have been proven inauthentic, while in others errors of copy or grammatical inconsistencies have led to complete revaluations of their content. Were the fragments parts of a book, like Diogenes Laërtius believed? They may have been also just what they look like: maxims, or *gnomai*[2] as the Greeks called them, teachings written in a compact form and intended to foster thought.

Heraclitus' starting point is the observation of nature. In Ancient Greek, the word for nature is φύσις [*phusis*], based on the verb φύειν [*phuein*] which means 'to grow, to appear.' Nature was perceived as a dynamic entity. Far from the modern consumerist's notion of nature – a mix of beautiful landscapes, exploitable resources and endangered species – the Ancient Greeks saw nature as the provider of life and death, an intimate but also threatening force, a world in which everything is interlinked.

From this experience comes Heraclitus' notion that **EVERYTHING FLOWS**. He observed the change of the seasons, the life cycles of plants and animals, the moving sky, the rule of a king soon replaced by another, the inconsistency of humans' ideas.

Yet, "everything flows" is not only a way of understanding the changes of nature, it is an ontological statement, a statement about the 'is' of what is. One thing is common to everything: it flows, it moves, it changes.[3] According to Heraclitus, **being is becoming**. Everything always was, is now and will be forever changing, moving, shifting. Nothing stays the same. Movement is the fundamental law of reality.

We can read this in several of Heraclitus' fragments, for example: "you cannot step twice into the same river" (Fr. 91[4]). What we called 'a river' yesterday – although the word we use to designate it looks the same – is not identical to that which we call 'a river' today. So they are different, and yet they have something in common: they change.



A depiction of the Arno river between Florence and Pisa, by Leonardo da Vinci, c. 1503.

[2] From Ancient Greek γνώμη (gnṓmē, "thought, opinion"), from γιγνώσκειν (gignṓskein, "to know")
[3] "All entities move and nothing remains still", as reported by Plato in the *Cratylus*, 401d.
[4] The quoted fragments are referred to using the Diels-Kranz numeration.

To make such a statement means that Heraclitus trusted the information that his senses gave him (the water flows, we can experience it). Secondly, the grammar of this statement tells us that he projected his thoughts through time, to try and check which of his thoughts could **transcend** time. For example, while an expression like "the sky is blue" is true only when the sky is actually blue (on a cloudless day), the expression "everything changes" is **always** true, whatever the moment at which it is uttered. The expressions which attain this level belong to a specific kind of language: Heraclitus called it the language of wisdom, which expresses the nature of all things throughout their transformations.

Heraclitus observed how people would say one thing and then later, in other circumstances, its opposite, apparently forgetting what they had said earlier. In order to speak **wisely**, one therefore would need to salvage what was forgotten out of oblivion, and to combine it with its opposite, so as to understand what links these two opinions. Only the understanding of how one changes into the other is considered wisdom, while each opinion on its own belongs with the flow of life and won't stay the same for ever.

Interestingly, the Greek word for 'truth' is ἀλήθεια [*aletheia*], composed from ἀ- (alpha privative) and λήθη [*lethe*[5]] which means 'oblivion', 'concealment.' When Heraclitus defines wisdom as "acting and speaking what is true" (Fr. 112), he seems to point towards the necessity of recalling what had been forgotten, since the nature of something can only be understood when taking into account how it transforms itself. We can't know the future, but we can remember the past and use memory to make comparisons with the present, enabling us to understand what's changing.

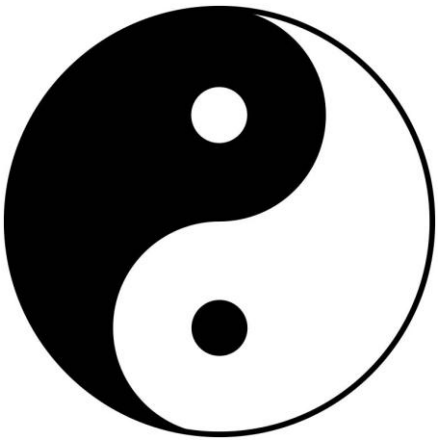
One of Heraclitus' conclusions was that: "The waking have one common world, but the sleeping turn aside, each into a world of their own." (Fr. 89) In other words, there is a **gap** between the way people commonly think (each dreaming their particular dream), and how the language of wisdom clears a new path: there is one common world for those who are awake, who have understood how to look for the relations between things. While the things change, their relations express change itself.

He says something similar in Fragment 36: "It is wise, listening not to me but to reason [*logos*], to agree that all things are one." He marks here the fact that the language of wisdom is independent from him as an individual, since it can be spoken by anyone who attains this level. It means that our individual appetites (e.g. to be hungry) can indeed divert us from wisdom, and that our senses (e.g. to feel cold) for the same reason cannot grasp at the unity of everything. To grasp the unity of everything is possible thanks to a **logos**, a way of thinking/speaking which is apt to identify the same 'is' in different movements (from hungry to full, from cold to warm, and vice versa).

Heraclitus understands nature as a **unity of opposites**. Night will give birth to day, and day to night, just like something the warmest thing can only cool down, and the coldest thing can only warm up (cf. Fr. 49). To get how Heraclitus thought this through, it is important to keep in mind that neither 'cold' nor 'warm' exist by themselves, but only as

[5] This can remind us of one of the five rivers of the Greek mythical underworld, the river Lethe. It was believed that anybody who drank for its waters would experience complete oblivion.

comparative elements of an ever-changing reality. If opposites are one, it does not mean that warm=cold, or that day=night, since we would then be expressing a (contradictory) logical identity. Instead, Heraclitus expresses an ontological continuity.



In Taoism, a tradition born c. 5th centuries BCE in China, an idea similar to that of Heraclitus is expressed. Taoism posits a continuity between two principles (the *yin* and the *yang*) that transform into each other and compose the movement of the universe. The word "Tao" (or "Dao") expresses this underlying natural order, which is said to be "nameless" because it is impossible to describe with words.

Within this continuity, an order exists that wouldn't allow for something to grow colder eternally: at one point, it would have to grow warmer. Heraclitus calls δίκη [*dike*], the Greek word for '**justice**', this law of alternation. This law manifests itself through conflict (cf. Fr. 80: "Conflict is Justice"), which is yet another way to speak about change. Things are always in a movement towards their opposite, and we could have the impression that at one point an equilibrium could be attained, yet this is never the case. Heraclitus thus sees in **war** the principle of all becoming: "War is father of all and king of all; and some he has shown as gods, others men; some he has made slaves, others free." (Fr. 53) Here, war [*polemos*] is a metaphor for **absolute movement**.

To designate altogether the laws of nature, Heraclitus uses the word κόσμος [*kosmos*] which translates into 'the order of the world.' We find it for example in Fragment 30: "The ordering [*kosmos*], the same for all, no god nor man has made, but it ever was and is and will be: fire ever living, kindled in measures and in measures going out." Once again, we see here how this order transcends all particularities, encompassing everything, gods and men alike. In this fragment, Heraclitus also seems to identify fire as the fundamental, constitutive element of all things, a fire that perpetually changes "in measure", i.e. according to the order of the world, the dynamics of opposites.

Let us look at a last fragment. "They do not comprehend how a thing agrees at variance with itself; it is an attunement [*harmonie*] turning back on itself, like that of the bow and the lyre." (Fr. 51) The pronoun "they" designates humans, with their changing opinions, who stop short of figuring out the unity of the cosmos. The examples of the bow and the lyre point first toward a constitutive tension: that of the wood with the string(s). These are metaphors, which means that we could apprehend anything in a similar way: a human body is constituted of tensions, an atom of hydrogen as well, etc. Yet, what is specific to the bow and to the lyre is that, to bend them or play them there is a need for two hands, and for exerting two forces in *opposite* directions. To speak wisely, or to act wisely, one must speak or act within the unity of opposites, attentive to the nature of the cosmos (cf. Fr. 112 + 54).

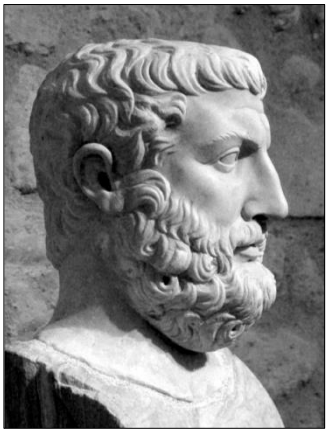
Everything Is

Parmenides

Parmenides (c. 515 – c. 450 BCE) thought in another way. Born in Elea (present-day southern Italy), then a Greek colony, Parmenides wrote a poem in which he holds the position that becoming is impossible. How did he come to that view?

In the second part of his poem, he delves into the analysis of the "two ways of searching": two ways that have been used by humans in order to understand reality. But, of these two ways, only one receives his approbation.

1. "The first, namely, that what-is is, and that what-is-not is not, is the way of conviction, for truth is its companion."
   → The first way is the way of what is.
   → The expression "what-is" (that we can also express as "being") can be replaced by anything. For example: "this tree is, and this not-tree is not".
   → With "truth is its companion", Parmenides presents this path as the only one by which the nature of things can be known to us.
2. "The other, namely, that what-is is not, and that what-is-not is, – that, I tell thee, is a wholly untrustworthy path. For you cannot know what is not – that is impossible – nor utter it;"
   → This second way is the way of what is not.
   → It is impossible to give an example, since everything that could be thought or said would come under the first way (the way of what is).



A bust of Parmenides discovered in Velia, Italy.

After these first steps, Parmenides rounds up with an ontological proposition: "For it is the same thing that can be thought and that can be." (III) Here Parmenides establishes a strict identity between thinking and being: if we can think something, then that something is ; if something is, then we can think it.

What are the consequences of this way of thinking? Firstly, Parmenides implies that there is an identity between the things that are and the thoughts we conceive of these things, so that for example the notion we have of what 'a tree' is, is the same as at least one existing tree. This position will have important repercussions in the debate concerning what is the relation between our ideas of the real and the real.

Secondly, Parmenides infers that beings cannot 'change,' unlike Heraclitus claimed, because it would imply that *before* something was what it is now, it was something else, namely 'not being what it is'—and according to Parmenides this is impossible: it is

impossible for something that is to come from something that is not.[6] He argues: "For what kind of origin for it, will you look for? In what way and from what source could it have drawn its increase? I shall not let thee say nor think that it came from what is not; for it can neither be thought nor uttered that what is not is." (VIII, 7-9).

If nothing becomes, this means for Parmenides that everything that has been, is and will be, ***is*** **at the same time**. Each instant is discontinuous in relation to the others (there is no "change" that "links" them), but all instants **are** together **one whole**. Everything that is, is "uncreated and indestructible, alone, complete, immovable and without end. Nor was it ever, nor will it be; for now it is, all at once, a continuous one." (VIII, 3-4)

With this affirmation, Parmenides becomes the founder of a new metaphysical view, stating that the passage of time and the becoming are illusions. His arguments are ontological and logical, and we can easily figure out that he rejects sense experience and the observation of nature. But he won something in the bargain: this very strong concept of identity, that allows him to think how what-is is what it is, and nothing else.

Our understanding of this concept will enable us to address questions that underlie many other concepts, sometimes in directions far removed from that taken by Parmenides. If, on the one hand, Parmenides' demand for truth seems unsurpassable, on the other, thinking about the transformations of matter on the basis of Parmenides seems impossible. And what of this demand itself? Is it realistic? Does it take sufficient account of our singular experience as human beings? The limitations of our language?

Epistemology

We understand now that when we ask what is 'is' (=ontology), we are immediately confronted with a second question: <u>what is thinking</u>, which can also be formulated as <u>how do we know</u>? This is the starting point for a second type of philosophical questioning: **epistemology**, from ἐπιστήμη [*epistḗmē*], which means 'science, knowledge'.

Do we have the ability, as humans, to actually think/speak the truth? A truth that would remain always the same? Or a truth that would also be subject to change? What is our concept of truth? Are there things we can know, and others we cannot? Why? And how could we know more than we do now? How could we broaden our limits?

Heraclitus' view made it difficult to assert anything about anything: if everything changes, then how can we know anything? The words we use, the rules we live by, the people we know, etc. if they are all changing at all times, how could we rely on them? Know

[6] A similar view appears in the *Bhagavad Gita*, a 700-verse Hindu scripture, dated to the second half of the first millennium BCE. Here is an extract from Chapter II: "That which is can never cease to be; that which is not will not exist. To see this truth of both is theirs who part essence from accident, substance from shadow. Indestructible, learn thou! the Life is, spreading life through all; it cannot anywhere, by any means, be anywise diminished, stopped, or changed."

them? For Heraclitus, the *language of wisdom* was the answer: what we can truly know are the relations between things within the dynamic unity of opposites.

Parmenides' view is maybe logically more "convincing". But isn't his ontology limited by its inability to think *change*? Moreover, is it only true as long as someone takes it to be true? If so, we run the risk of understanding only what we understand – a vicious circle – with no capacity to transmit our understanding and share it.

Ultimately, epistemology cannot be separated from those who think it: how we know something is linked to what we know and what we don't, to who we are and why we think.

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CHAPTER 3

KNOW YOURSELF

The Oracle at Delphi

Born from the head of Zeus, Athena was looked upon as the goddess of intelligence and war. She was also the protector of the city of Athens, and was revered by some as the patron of philosophy. But other gods were looked towards as key figures of wisdom and the activity of philosophizing. One of them is Apollo, the god of light (sun and sight), of beauty (poetry, music, arts), of truth and prophecy.

One of the most famous temples throughout all Antiquity was the Temple of Apollo in Delphi. Many authors, from Greece and abroad, spoke about it at length: in Delphi was an Oracle, a woman who, when asked properly and with the proper sacrifices, would answer one question. Her answers, it was believed, were not her own but the answers of the god – Apollo – speaking through her. She entered into a trance (with the help of vapours coming out from a breach in the rocks located under the temple) and thus became a suitable vehicle for the god to make himself heard.

Remnants of the theatre and the Oracle temple at Delphi.

The oracle's response *was* the word of the god: an indication of the nature of the discourse, serving as a key to interpretation, and at the same time signalling a limit to the type of questions that could be asked without committing impiety, i.e. without disrespecting the divinity.

At the entrance of the temple, on the lintel, was engraved an inscription in Ancient Greek that has remained famous: γνῶθι σεαυτόν (*gnōthi seauton*), meaning '**know yourself**.'[7] In this time and place, it had a specific meaning: "you who come to ask something from the god, **know that you are mortal**."[8] Apollo had a reputation for his alacrity at reminding humans – through supernatural punishments – that they were not immortal and therefore were inferior to the gods. Thus the maxim both issues a warning and gives an indication: do not ask questions that disrespect the hierarchy of beings[9], ask questions that give meaning to your mortal condition.

Human beings are mortal, they are imperfect, they are subject to change and dominated by forces stronger than them. From this idea stems **a sense of fate**: humans are not the only forces at work in shaping their lives. It doesn't mean that the Ancient Greeks were "fatalists" (= that we have no say at all in what happens to us), but that they had a sense of their limits and of the fragility of human life.

Knowing ourselves is thus no easy task, especially as humans are not always inclined to listen to truths they don't like. The story of Cassandra, daughter of King Priam of Troy, illustrates this power of denial. Mythology has it that Apollo, in his desire to seduce her, offered her the gift of prophecy. But Cassandra refused to give herself to him, and Apollo took revenge: he added to the gift a curse: that nobody would ever believe the prophecies she would make. She predicted the fall of Troy, and, indeed, nobody believed her… and Troy fell. This story tells us that the idea of prophecy does not entail that everything is written, but only that, from the perspective of the gods – immortal beings who see generations and generations of humans live and die – the fall of Troy was predictable, and so was the Trojans' denial of Cassandra's prophecy. It tells us that the Greeks had a very clear idea of the human inability to integrate all knowledge, and that a shadow always remains, because humans are part of the cosmos and occupy a specific place within it.

"Know yourself," first and foremost, therefore means 'know that you are human and what human is.' In the god of light's language, it also means know/see your own limits, since light is what allows our eyes to see the delimitation of things, to distinguish, differentiate, compare and measure.

Human Being Is the Measure of All Things

Protagoras

In the 5th century BCE, some were not convinced that the gods existed, but since religion was more a civic duty than a question of personal conviction, as long as they participated in the collective rites this would not affect their life. However, **Protagoras**,

[7] The words were later translated into Latin: *nosce te ipsum*.
[8] Translated into Latin, the expression is *memento mori* (=remember that you are mortal).
[9] The word *hierarchy* is composed of *hieros*, "sacred", and *arkhê*, meaning "power", "command". Hierarchy literally means sacred order: immortal gods governing mortal humans.

born circa 490 BCE, took the risk of publicizing his opinion. In one of the few fragments that have survived until today, he stated the following:

> Concerning the gods, I have no means of knowing either that they exist or do not exist, or what they are, because of the obscurity of the subject, and the brevity of human life.

Because he publicized his doubts concerning the existence of the gods, an accusation of impiety was formulated against him. Luckily, Protagoras escaped with his life, but "the Athenians expelled him; and they burnt his works in the market-place," if we are to believe Diogenes Laërtius. Yet if we take a closer look, Protagoras didn't say that the gods did not exist, but that he couldn't assert their existence or non-existence.

Using a modern notion, we can say that Protagoras' position was not that of an **atheist** (= the affirmation that god(s) do not exist). Protagoras was what we would call today an **agnostic**, a word composed from the Ancient Greek ἀ- (*alpha privative*) and γνῶσις (*gnōsis*), meaning 'knowledge.' To be an agnostic is to share the view that the gods' existence or non-existence are equally unknowable.

As Protagoras puts it, the subject is "obscure," meaning that we cannot shed any light on it. Let us decompose the metaphor. For us to *see* something, four things are needed: a source of light, eyes that can perceive the light, an object that reacts to the light and a background which contrasts with the object. One element – light – serves as a common ground on which all the others can relate to each other. But Protagoras says that we cannot find any common ground between the gods and us that would allow us to know them.

The second argument calls upon the "brevity of human life," meaning that, in order to know something immortal, Protagoras thinks that we would need to be immortal ourselves. Once again, he puts forward the necessity of having a common measure between a knowing subject and the object they want to know. Since we, humans, cannot find this measure concerning the gods, the object is unknowable.

With these two arguments, Protagoras points towards the need for a measure that is common to the subject and the object. What could this measure be? There might be several, but each must be traceable back to ourselves.

Protagoras wrote:

> πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος,
> τῶν μὲν ὄντων ὡς ἔστιν, τῶν δὲ οὐκ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν.
>
> Human being is the measure of all things,
> of things which are, in that they are, and of things which are not, in that they are not.

The Ancient Greek word for 'human' is ἄνθρωπος (*ánthrōpos*). Not 'man' (ἀνδρός, *andrós*) or 'woman' (γυνή, *gunḗ*), not adult or child, not citizen or slave, but the human as a species, as a specific set of potentials and limitations, part of the cosmos.

'Human' is said by Protagoras to be the measure (Greek: *metron*) of all things, because it is in ourselves that we need to find the elements on the grounds of which we will be able

to know reality. In **Protagoras' epistemology**, something with which we have no common ground is unknowable to us. It may be 'the gods', or it may be 'the beginning of the universe' for example. Conversely, what we can know is what we can relate to, enabling us to measure it (to ourselves). To know, we need to establish a relationship.

Placing a human being next to a monument (here the temple of Apollo at Delphi) allows us to better appreciate its size by comparison.

As a consequence, everyone, because of their own experience, will know different things and differently than the next individual. Depending on the subject who says "I know," the outcome will be different—a position we today call **subjectivism**. It implies that each and every *subject* has a potential to know, a potential that is to be developed. It also comprises an inherent risk, that of **solipsism** (= being the only one to know what you know), confronting us with the need for exchange and debate.

Another consequence is that human beings will know different things and differently than the next species. For example, birds can see ultraviolet light, which humans cannot. But then how do we know that they can? In order to discover it, we first had to discover the full light spectrum, so as to become able to find a relationship – through our instruments of observation – between what we know and what the birds see. We understood so much more by expanding the scope of our understanding through new techniques; yet our techniques are also part of what we are as knowing subjects. And the risk is always present to remain convinced that what we (humans) cannot see, doesn't exist, or that what we (humans) think is good, is good for all living creatures—an attitude that is commonly referred to as **anthropocentrism**.

To summarize, Protagoras' sentence can be understood in two ways. The first one is to identify *anthropos* with "a human individual." For example, if you feel that the weather is cold, then, for you, the weather **is** truly cold; there is no absolute evaluation of the nature of a temperature, but only evaluations that are subjective, i.e. relative to one's perception, and the truth differs according to each individual. The second way is to identify *anthropos* with the specific determinations of "what makes us humans." For example, if you feel cold, it is because humans have developed in such a way that the nervous system reacts to any temperature that would eventually threaten its survival. The truth of 'cold' is a truth that stems from humans as a species.

One philosophical view arises from this way of thinking: **relativism**. Truths exist only within relations of knowledge, and nothing can be known 'absolutely.'

With Protagoras, we understand that everything we know, we know as humans. From this follows an essential precaution: we should never forget that we are part of the knowledge we claim to form of the world around us, since the observer plays an essential role in the observation.

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CHAPTER 4

Language & Politics

A liminal definition of politics might be "the way we manage the life we have in common". If the Greek word πόλις [*polis*] literally means 'city,' the word *politics* more broadly conveys the sense of a group of people living together in a village, a town, a region, a country, a planet. These groups organize to achieve their goals, some of which – starting with survival – must appear sufficiently common to motivate their coming together.

Every form of life is a form of organisation, so what is an organisation? It is quite remarkable that the Ancient Greek word ὄργανον [*órganon*] was used to mean so many different things: a tool, an organ of the senses, an organ of the body, even a musical instrument. In English, we use the word '**organisation**' in every fields – from biology to sociology, from literature to information technology – with the result that the notion seems self-evident. It points also towards our use of speech, λόγος [*logos*], in order to structure and communicate the very experiences we try to organise.

On any political ground, the same kinds of questions arise: what form of organisation should we choose? Which goals are the best for us, and why? Ancient Greek politicians, lawmakers and philosophers led intense reflection on these questions, and so we ought to know what made the Greek experience so unique in that respect. To speak about the Athenian democracy in particular will be important for us to understand how such a political organisation came to be. It is often presented nowadays as an ideal to be imitated, yet this admiration doesn't take into account much of its historical reality.

The Athenian Democracy

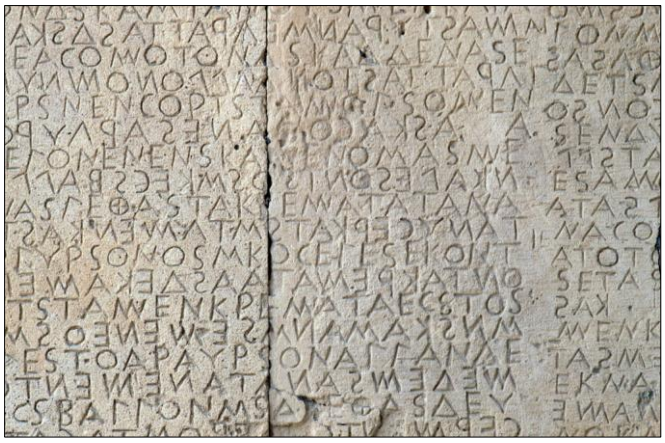
In the 7th century BCE, Athens was among the most important city-states of Ancient Greece. It was governed by an *archon* (Greek for 'ruler') and the *Aeropagus*, a body constituted of ex-archons, all of whom were **aristocrats** (≡ a minority of wealthy men issued from old and influential families). However, this would soon change dramatically.

The first pivotal point was, in 621 BCE, the replacement of the oral law (that included blood feud[10]) by a **written code**, which could only be enforced by a court of law. It was a major innovation: all literate citizens could now acquire a common knowledge of the laws, could defend their case in front of the court, and, should they feel unjustly treated by the

[10] When a murder was committed, the family of the deceased would be in charge of seeking justice by their own means. This would often lead to an escalation, which would have consequences for the community. The notion that the State should have the "monopoly of violence" (cf. Max Weber) appeared in Athens with this first written code, and the repression of revenge.

court, could appeal to the Aeropagus. The knowledge of the law and the ability to argue efficiently and convince an audience became key elements in the political life of citizens.

This first written code, however, didn't leave much space for argumentation. The archon who wrote it, Draco, decided that death was to be the penalty for all crimes. Asked why he thought that theft and murder deserved the same punishment, he answered that theft certainly deserved death, and that he was only sorry that there was nothing more severe to punish murder (we still use the adjective "draconian" today to describe laws, political measures or even diets that seem excessively tough).



Portion of the law code of Gortyn (in Crete, Greece), Doric inscriptions on stone slabs, 5th century BCE. Photo by Walter Charles Mills.

It was Solon, in the years following his election as archon in 594 BCE, who repealed Draco's laws and wrote them anew, cancelling the death penalty except for intentional homicide (unintentional homicide was then punished by exile).

But Solon did much more: he gave **the right to every Athenian citizen to participate** in assembly meetings (called the *Ecclesia*), and constituted a council of 400 members (the *Boule*) that would be in charge of running the State. Before Solon, only a handful of aristocrats were in charge of the city-state; with him, every citizen – that is, every free male who owned property – would take on a political role.

Last but not least, to give this new framework every opportunity, Solon decided on another measure: **he cancelled all debts**, leading to a complete redistribution of wealth towards more equality. Indeed, how could any "free man" be independent in his decisions when bound by important debts towards another? Moreover, if a debt was not honoured by a debtor, his creditor was authorized to force him into slavery… which would in turn reduce the number of free men able to take part in the city-state.

In 561 BCE, an aristocrat named Peisistratos, who had become famous for leading the capture of one of the ports of the nearby city of Megara, began to plot and foster alliances, aiming at becoming the **tyrant** of Athens. In Ancient Greek, the word τύραννος [*túrannos*] designated a sovereign, and was not marked with the same negative connotation that the English *tyrant* has today (= a cruel and narcissistic ruler). After two failed attempts which resulted in temporary exiles, Peisistratos came back with a small army in 546, took the city and remained in power until 528.

Peisistratos did not modify the existing laws, but rather – during a rule that was later described by Aristotle as temperate and fair – aimed for **political stability**. He encouraged agriculture, commerce and cultural life in Athens[11]. He allowed the aristocracy to keep most of their privileges, while at the same time cutting the taxes for the lower class and creating employment (for example with the construction of Athens' first aqueduct).

When he died, his son Hippias succeeded him, ruling side by side with his brother Hipparchus. But after the latter was murdered, Hippias' rule became oppressive. He was eventually deposed with the help of the Spartans, and Athens would soon experience another period of growing democracy. Remarkable **reforms** were introduced by Cleisthenes (who, in 508, reorganised the population into new administrative groups – called *demes*, from the Ancient Greek δῆμος [*demos*], 'the people' – in which each male over 18 had to be registered) and Ephialtes (who, in 462, reduced the power of the Aeropagus to a criminal court and allowed lower-class citizens to be part of it).

It is also important to note that all these reforms took place during a time of continuous **conflict with the invading Persians** (499-449 BCE). In 480 BCE, the Greek alliance – composed by Athens, Sparta, Corinth and other city-states, and let by the Athenian general Themistocles – won the naval battle of Salamis, while heavily outnumbered. This victory marked the beginning of the Persians' retreat; yet the war went on for 30 years on land and on sea. Since the Athenians' army was a militia (=constituted of citizens, for whom it was a duty to serve as protectors of their city), this period of struggle and alliances fostered the Athenians' democratic power.

At Ephialtes' death in 461, political leadership was then passed to his deputy, Pericles. It is from this time that modern scholars date the beginning of the **Athenian Golden Age**, also known as the Age of Pericles. The Greco-Persian war drew to a close and a new era of prosperity began, with Athens **securing naval supremacy and leading imperialistic conquests** all around the Mediterranean Sea, expanding its influence.

Bust of Pericles (d429 BCE),
copy of a Greek original (marble).

A great orator and a skilled statesman, Pericles was elected general (Greek: *strategos*) in 445. Since the army was constituted of lower-class citizens, Pericles, who wanted to further Athens' military dominance, courted and favoured the *demos*. The Acropolis was built during this period, to celebrate Athens' power and please the gods. In 431, Pericles led Athens during the first

[11] His rule was especially favourable to the arts of speech, with the introduction of two new forms of oral poetry, the dithyramb (a hymn sung and danced in the honour of Dionysus) and the tragedy (a form of drama based on the idea that the main protagonist has a fatal flaw, that they would be drawn to recognise and finally accomplish). These two new forms appeared two to three generations into the new context of the written code and could be interpreted as a sign of the repression of the archaic way of life (blood feud and aristocratic leadership).

two years of the Peloponnesian **wars against Sparta** and its allies; but he died the next year from a major **epidemic** (long referred to as a plague, but more probably a typhus or typhoid fever) that weakened the city, and ultimately contributed to its defeat against Sparta.

The *acropolis* (Greek for "high city") of Athens.

In 413, an Athenian war expedition against Syracuse (in Sicily, then under Sparta's domination) ended in a disaster; and in 405, at the Battle of Aegospotami, Athens' fleet was completely destroyed by the Spartans, supported by the Persians. Sparta's other allies, Corinth and Thebes, asked for Athens to be annihilated and their citizens enslaved, but the Spartans – who had now taken over all of Athens' colonies – refused. Instead, they installed in Athens a regime of their making, known as the Thirty Tyrants.

Yet, in 403 the Athenian forces took back control. **Democracy was reinstated** and would last for 60 more years (it was during this period that Plato lived most of his life). It ended definitively in 338 BCE, with the conquest of the city by Phillip II of Macedonia, the father of Alexander the Great. He established himself as supreme ruler (Greek: *hegemon*) over Macedonia and a newly formed federation of the subdued Greek city-states.

Co-optation & Competition

When considering Athens' many political struggles, we need to keep in mind that "citizens" represented only a fraction of the global population of the city-state. Only adult male Athenians who had completed their military training had the right to vote and to participate in the assemblies. With variations over the 5th and 4th centuries, it represented only 10 to 20% of the total number of inhabitants. Women and children were excluded, as well as slaves, freed slaves and metics[12] (= Greeks for other city-states). Therefore, the meaning of the word **democracy** – from the Ancient Greek δῆμος [*demos*], 'people' and κράτος [*krátos*], 'power, rule' – requires further examination.

- **Athenian women** had narrow rights, since many public places and social functions were forbidden to them. They could not own land, had no financial independence,

[12] Ancient Greek μέτοικος (*métoikos*), from metá, indicating change, and oîkos, 'home, dwelling.'

and arranged marriages were the norm. Their assigned role was to take care of the οἶκος [*oikos*], the Greek word for 'household,' and they would mostly stay indoors. The women one could see in the streets were either too poor to have servants, or were slaves, or prostitutes. Let us note that the situation of Athenian women was at its worst during the Classical period, when laws aiming at gender segregation were implemented. This discrimination was also an Athenian particularity; by contrast, Spartan women could own land and train with the men in the arts of war.

- **Slaves** were by far the biggest group of people living in Athens, as an average Athenian household possessed 3 to 4 slaves, working as servants or in agriculture. But a wealthy Athenian, according to Plato (who owned five slaves at the end of his life), could own up to 50 slaves. A slave owner would earn money by lending them, for example to work in the silver mines, and could live upon this revenue (the slaves themselves received a small amount of money each year). From this data,[13] it is easy to figure that slaves represented a considerable source of energy (and time), and that, without them, the Athenian democracy would probably not have existed at all. Last but not least, they were mostly (if not exclusively) not Greek. Obtained through war, piracy and trade, they were considered "possessions," as was common in Antiquity from Babylonia to Egypt and Rome.
- Greeks from other city-states had no citizen rights in Athens, but could live in the city under the special status of **metic**, created toward the end of the 6th century BCE. They came to Athens to seek economic opportunities or flee persecution, and though they didn't have the citizens' privileges, they shared the same duties: to undergo the mandatory military service and pay taxes. Still, they had access to the courts of law; and because they spoke Greek, they were considered part of the same cultural group, apt at understanding the laws and customs.

From this quick overview, we can conclude that – like in today's European democracies – the constitution of the citizenry was based on the idea that a homogeneous group sharing a relative equality was necessary for this type of governance to work. Athenian citizens made their decisions between peers (= people who are at an equal level), co-opted[14] on the basis of their parentage and gender. If the co-optation criteria in today's Switzerland for example are more inclusive[15], the principle remains the same: the inclusion and exclusion of other people into the citizenry depends on the decision of the existing citizenry, which tends to protect their own privileges.

A **major difference between Ancient and Modern democracy** resides in the fact that the former is a direct democracy (= citizens decide upon laws directly) while the latter is a

[13] A census made between 317 BC and 307 BC by the tyrant Demetrius Phalereus arrived at the following figures for the whole of Attica: 21,000 citizens, 10,000 metics and 400,000 slaves.

[14] Co-optation, in the sociological sense, means the creation of a homogeneous group by means of selecting its members on the basis of defined criteria (which can encompass language, ideas and/or beliefs, but also skin colour, gender, clothes, lifestyle, etc.).

[15] Women have the right to vote at the federal level since 1971, and foreigners can apply for Swiss citizenship after a number of years spent in the country under specific conditions.

representative democracy (= citizens elect people to represent them)[16]. Athenian social roles were much more defined and "solid" than what we are accustomed to.

Athens was governed by men, all of them part of the army, who, over several centuries, grew more powerful, accumulating conquests, lands and slaves. While this culture contributed to the development of economic and legal structures, it made **competition** a central motif of Athenian politics. It is best designated by the Ancient Greek word αγων [*agon*], meaning 'competition, contest, disputation', used to describe the attitude of trying to best other men. The agonistic spirit was expressed in athletic sports and also in war; in contests of drama and poetry, and also in tribunals and politics—all activities that were only carried out by men (at the theatre, men would play the feminine roles as well as the masculine ones).

Amphora given to the winner of the Panathenaic Games (one of the most important sportive event in Classical Athens, held every four years), showing men running naked as was customary. Made of clay, c. 500 BCE.

This spirit of constant emulation explains in part how strong the concern for politics was for all citizens. In the words of Pericles:

> We do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all.[17]

An Athenian man's life was **a public life**, and the very notion of 'private citizen' seems out of place in Ancient Greece more generally. The same goes with religion: at the time, nobody felt like they had to believe 'personally' in the gods, it was not a matter of private belief or conviction, but a matter of social harmony. It was part of the duty all individuals had towards the perpetuation and prosperity of the *polis*.

It was typical to see public **debates** taking place on the ἀγορά [*agora*][18], a word that designates an ancient square or market place, and still used nowadays. Debates were an essential part of life, alongside the struggle for influence and power at the general assembly, the *Ecclesia*. Any citizen could come up with a new proposition, express his opinion or submit a new law—a unique feature in ancient societies. This provides us with

[16] Switzerland is a particular case in that regard, since laws are regularly submitted to the vote of the people, while most decisions are taken by their representatives in the National Council (lower house) and in the Council of States (upper house). Hence the expression of *semi-direct democracy*.
[17] *Funeral Oration*, Thucydides II.40, trans. Rex Warner (1954).
[18] From ἄγείρω (*ageírō*), meaning "to gather".

another explanation as to why the art of persuasion became so important. However, it was not in Greece that the art called rhetoric was born, but in a Greek colony.

Rhetoric, the Art of Persuasion

'Rhetoric' comes from the Ancient Greek ῥητορικὴ τέχνη [*rhetorikè tékhne*], which translates into the art or technique of the public speaker. Also called "oratory art," we can further define it as the art of using language to persuade an audience.

As a matter of fact, rhetoric is anterior to its known history: humans have tried to convince each other probably since language exists. Many texts written by different people – Chinese, Hebrews, Indians, Egyptians, etc. – are proof of that. But the Greek culture invented and perfected two things: first, rhetoric as an ensemble of techniques (a *practice*); and second, a theory of this art, reflecting on its goals, potentials and limits.

It began circa 465 BCE in Greek Sicily, when a civil war was ended with the expulsion of the local tyrants. The citizens who had been dispossessed by the latter reclaimed what was theirs, and this resulted in a great number of judiciary conflicts. Since lawyers did not exist at the time, citizens were in an urgent need to find means to defend their cause.

A Sicilian philosopher named Corax, a disciple of Empedocles, laid the foundation of the first oratory art. His work would be continued by his own disciple, Tisias, and by another disciple of Empedocles, Gorgias, who would later move to Athens and meet great success throughout the Greek city-states. A new profession was born, that of rhetoricians. They provided all plaintiffs in legal disputes with a tool to help them win their cases, in return for a fee for this service. Their number soon grew, stimulating competition... and prices.

Rhetoric does not argument on the basis of what is true, but of **what is plausible**. The concept of εἰκώς [*eikós*] expresses this way of validating an argument through its power to convince. Let us look for example at judiciary matters: nobody will ever possess the objective truth of what really happened in a criminal case, but lawyers and prosecutors would come up with elements of proof, connections and hypotheses, which they would arrange so as to sway the jury's opinion. The objective truth may, or may not, be behind the most plausible arguments… Therefore a danger arises: a good rhetorician could actually win their case against the truth.

That was Gorgias' actual teaching: in order to learn rhetoric, one should train by defending the two sides in conflict with the same conviction. Protagoras, also a famous public speaker and teacher,[19] shared the same principle, with a technique that consisted in

[19] Known for his involvement in the political life of ancient Greece, Protagoras was a friend of Pericles and participated in the writing of new texts of law. For around 40 years, he travelled from one city to the other as a professional rhetorician. Protagoras would have been (according to Diogenes Laërtius) one of the first to take part in rhetorical contests at the Olympic Games. He also wrote several books, including a treaty on eristic, a branch of rhetoric specialized in arguments aimed at

"making the worse (or weaker) argument appear the better (the stronger)." He is also believed to have said that "there are two sides to every question", as a way of thinking through thesis and antithesis. Still more important was his maxim stating that "human is the measure of all things," since it would focus the rhetoric strategy on knowing who your audience is. What does your audience understand? What are their specific knowledge and framework of reference? By appealing to their representation of the world, to their subjectivity, to their strengths and weaknesses, a skilled rhetorician would indeed be one step ahead and could bring forth the desired outcome.

Protagoras' relativism would have allowed him to defend any cause, and this is probably what led Socrates and Plato to criticize him, along with Gorgias and other men who were called **sophists**: men who were specialists in areas related to the arts of language and persuasion (grammar, rhetoric, law, philosophy) and who were selling their services to the highest bidder. In the 21st century CE, the word "sophist" is still used to designate manipulative public speakers and fallacious argumentation, people who use rhetorical techniques in order to satisfy their own interests.

But matters might not be so simple, as we will see when studying Plato, Aristotle and Nietzsche. Rhetoric as art of persuasion has been used by all philosophers, not as an end in itself but as a tool—yet, can we truly separate the tool and the one who wields it? The question is more relevant than ever, since rhetoric is engrained in all matters of speech today. In the courts of law, in management, in marketing, in the media, and of course in politics, the ones whose arguments fall short lose, and the ones who are able to defend their opinions convincingly stack the odds in their favour.

Techniques & Biases

In this chapter, we will study a couple of techniques invented by the Greek rhetoricians. It must be the occasion to ask ourselves: how is it possible for a technique to work so efficiently on the human mind? Are we so easily tricked?

Both Plato and Aristotle said that one should not use rhetoric in order to convince someone or a crowd of something false. But obviously, not everybody adheres to this moral standard. Moreover, the human mind is made in such a way that several tactics and tricks would have it believe that the speaker is actually speaking the truth. We are therefore confronted with the necessity to defend ourselves:

> It would be strange if an inability to defend oneself by means of the body is shameful, while there is no shame in an inability to use speech; the latter is more characteristic of humans than is use of the body. And if it is argued that great harm can be done by unjustly using such power of words, this objection applies to all good things except for virtue, and most of all to

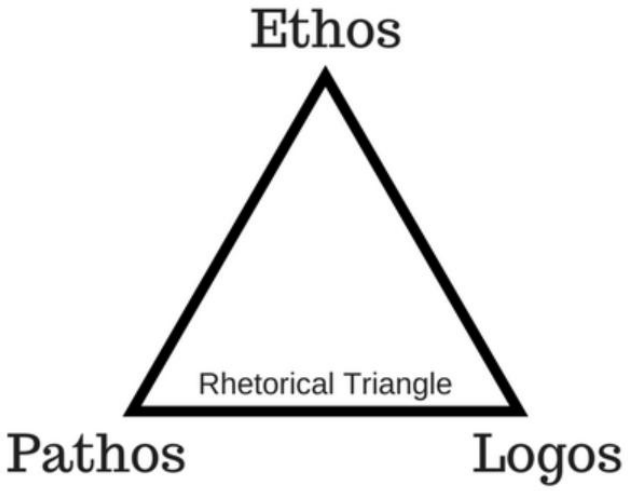
disputing someone else's arguments. The word 'eristic' comes from *Eris*, the ancient Greek goddess of chaos, strife and discord.

> the most useful things, like strength, health, wealth, and military strategy; for by using these justly one would do the greatest good and unjustly, the greatest harm.[20]

In his treaty *On Rhetoric*, one of the most important books ever written on the topic, Aristotle invites us to a practice of self-defence regarding speech.

Moreover, it is, according to him, the responsibility of the ones who know the truth to make the effort to convey it with the maximum efficiency. Yet it is everybody's responsibility to make it impossible for liars to have the upper hand simply by being better at rhetoric. Therefore, learning rhetoric is essential for all citizens.

Aristotle posited three poles which synthetize the basic structure of the art of persuasion. The first one is **ethos**, the attitude of the speaker, his style and posture, creating credibility. The second one is **logos**, the capacity for rational argumentation. The third one is **pathos**, the way a speaker appeals to emotions, both positive and negative. All rhetorical techniques perform within this triangle, which aptly describes how speech is always a relationship between different human individuals and/or groups.



The rhetorical triangle is an easy way to keep this in mind: whenever listening to a speech, or being active in a debate, one can work on these three aspects to decipher the intention of the speaker, or reinforce one's own capacity to persuade an audience. Yet, everything also depends on the latter: do the people you talk to know a lot about the matter at hand? Or are they rather ignorant? Are they angry, or enthusiastic about it? Will they trust an energic speaker, or rather a calm one? Let us remember that rhetoric was crafted to convince *particular* human beings within a *particular* context.

In the 20th century CE, behavioural scientists came up with a new way to look at this topic: if we can be convinced of something false, it is because we have mental habits that inhibit our capacity to think logically. Rhetoricians use these **biases**, either through fallacious arguments (*logos*), through charisma, body language and playacting (*ethos*) and through appealing to the desires, frustrations and insecurities of the audience (*pathos*).

[20] Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, Book 1, 1355 a-b.

Let us take a look at some biases, in parallel to the techniques that put them to use:

Cognitive Bias[21]	Rhetorical technique
Band wagoning: Tendency to adopt the same beliefs as the people around you, or to assume that the majority always makes the right decision.	The argument *ad populum* (= *from majority*, or *by consensus*) consists in appealing to what is supposedly accepted by all. "As everybody knows," "Everybody would agree that," etc.
Halo Effect: Tendency to perceive a person's attributes as covering more areas that they actually do. E.g. people tend to give credit to a famous author, a president or any kind of revered figure, regardless of their real expertise in the matter at hand.	The argument *from authority* consists in claiming an authority's support as evidence for an argument's conclusion. "Socrates/Jesus/Napoleon/Einstein said that," "Mr X, PhD in finance, guarantees that," "The teacher said that," etc.
Fundamental Attribution Error: Tendency to believe that your own worth (or the worth of your profession, your country, your skin colour, your culture, etc.) is the product of your effort and innate genius, while others' is due to luck or even trickery.	The argument *ad hominem* consists in attacking someone personally, in an attempt to discredit their ideas. As a result, the speaker automatically takes the higher moral ground. The use of racism and stigmatisation ("Jews are interested in money," "Blacks are violent people," etc.), in an explicit or implicit way, resorts to the same technique.
Anchoring Bias: Tendency to focus too much on a single piece of information rather than all available information. ⇨ Either the first information, the more recent or the most emotional one. Availability Heuristic: Tendency to attach too much weight to information that we happen to have available to us, while we haven't done any systematic research.	A public speaker always begins by creating a framework of reference, choosing to remind his/her listeners of some specific events, in order to prepare them to agree with his/her arguments. Creating perspective is necessary, but then, a fallacy would consist in "cherry picking," that is making a voluntary incomplete choice of facts, and manipulating the emotions of the audience with striking examples.

Speech is Power

To conclude this lesson on politics and language, let us take a look at the world vision of the most famous sophists. Indeed, Gorgias (483 – 375 BCE) did not only invent new rhetorical techniques and teach them, he reflected on the nature of the world, asking

[21] "Cognitive" comes for the Latin verb *cognoscere*, 'to know' => relating to the part of mental functions that deals with logic, as opposed to "affective" which deals with emotions.

himself what would be a reality in which speech would be all-powerful. He came up with the following argumentation:

1. Nothing exists;
2. Even if something exists, nothing can be known about it; and
3. Even if something can be known about it, knowledge about it can't be communicated to others.
4. Even if it can be communicated, it cannot be understood.

In the first statement, we recognise an attack against Parmenides, who said that to follow "the path of what is" is the only way to speak truly. Gorgias wrote against Parmenides precisely because Parmenides' statement looked so evident: by showing how easy it was to turn it upside down, he championed the power of speech.

But there is more. When Gorgias takes the opposite stance – saying that nothing exists – he implies that the principle of identity (e.g. a cat is a cat) is an illusion. Therefore, the definitions we give of all things do not hold any truth: their only power resides in how they are used in a debate (=how they perform). Notice that he does not say that definitions are true when convincing, but gets rid of the notion of truth altogether, by saying that knowledge is impossible—the most sceptical[22] position on that matter.

In the last two statements, Gorgias pushes forward by amplifying his stance, saying that [accurate] communication and [true/objective] understanding are impossible. Any interlocutor will always communicate what they mean and understand what has been said in their own subjective way. It gives the image of a world where solipsism is the rule, where truth is but a performance and where speech is power.

*

[22] Derived from the Ancient Greek σκεπτικός (*skeptikós*), which means 'thoughtful, inquiring,' the word "sceptic" nowadays designates someone who doubts all beliefs and claims.

CHAPTER 5

Socrates

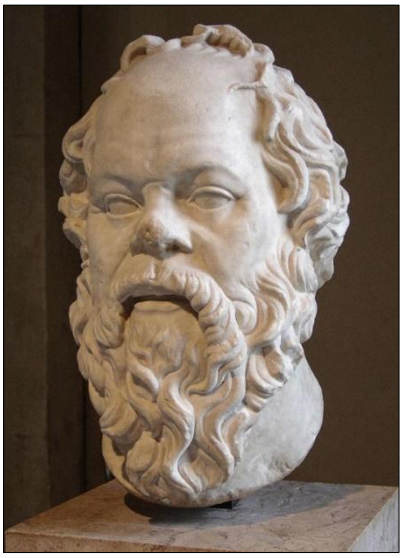
Socrates (470 – 399 BCE) is one of the most significant yet most enigmatic figures in the history of philosophy: significant because his stand against the sophists would be a game-changer; enigmatic because he wrote nothing himself, which presents us with the challenge of reconstructing his personality and ideas from the testimonies of others.

Of this evidence, Plato's dialogues are undisputedly the major piece. Plato was Socrates' follower during 9 years, from 407 until his master's death in 399. He then began writing dialogues in which Socrates was the main protagonist. We may thus speak of two figures: the historical Socrates on the one hand, and Plato's character on the other. Yet these two figures have proven to be quite impossible to differentiate, to such a degree that scholars today refer themselves to the "Socratic Problem."

The Midwife, the Gadfly & the Torpedo Ray

Born in 470 in Alopeke, a town located a couple of kilometres outside the walls of Athens but part of the city-state, Socrates spent nearly all his life in the region. Born from a lower class Athenian family, his father was a stonemason and his mother a midwife.

The legend has it that from an early age he was interested in public debates; but since minors were not allowed to enter the *agora* and participate, the young Socrates used to go to nearby shops to chat with the merchants.[23] He would soon take part in Athenian political life and become an inescapable figure of the city.



Head of Socrates, by Lysippos, 1st century CE (Louvre).

A question that has long entertained scholars is: **who were Socrates' teachers?**—In other words: to what extent was Socrates the originator of what is presented as "his" philosophy? Some sources say he discussed philosophical matters with Aspasia, an erudite woman from Miletus and concubine to Pericles. Probably more to the point is the indication from Plato that Socrates attended at least a few lectures of Prodikos of Ceos, a sophist who specialised in ethics and semantics. In another of Plato's dialogues, we see Socrates talking with Parmenides… but many scholars doubt that

[23] This story is told by Xenophon, another of Socrates' followers, who like Plato wrote several dialogues in which Socrates was the main protagonist (cf. *Memorabilia*, 4.2.1).

they ever met, due to their difference in age. Altogether, what we can assert is that Socrates was influenced by Parmenides, Heraclitus, and several thinkers of his time, including sophists.

Though the legend would have us believe that Socrates spent all his time in philosophical discussions, he reputedly became a stonemason like his father, and may have earned his living that way. In the *Theaetetus*, Plato wrote that Socrates also took from his mother's side, claiming that while she had been a midwife for bodies, he had become a midwife for souls.[24] Socrates is the inventor of a technique Plato calls **maieutics**, which involves helping people to "give birth" to beautiful speeches. It's the idea that we already know the truth, even though we've "forgotten" it, and that all we need is guidance to bring it out into the open again.

This also tells us that Socrates enjoyed the company of other men and couldn't possibly have bloomed alone in a desert. A very social man, he valued **friendship** (Greek φιλία, *philía*) and life within the community.

In his 50s, Socrates married Xanthippe, a woman much younger than him, as was customary in Ancient Greek culture. They had three boys together, who, according to Aristotle, turned out to be "fools and dullards."[25] But Xanthippe had another reputation, which we can read about in this extract from Xenophon, at the crossroads of Athenian misogyny and Socrates' political incorrectness:

> SOCRATES: "[…] woman's nature is really not a whit inferior to man's, except in its lack of judgment and physical strength. So if any one of you has a wife, let him confidently set about teaching her whatever he would like to have her know."
>
> ANTISTHENES: "If that is your view, how does it come that you don't practise what you preach by yourself educating Xanthippe, but live with a wife who is the hardest to get along with of all the women there are—yes, or all that ever were, I suspect, or ever will be?"
>
> SOCRATES: "Because I observe that men who wish to become expert horsemen do not get the most docile horses but rather those that are high-mettled, believing that if they can manage this kind, they will easily handle any other. My course is similar. Mankind at large is what I wish to deal and associate with; and so I have got her, well assured that if I can endure her, I shall have no difficulty in my relations with all the rest of human kind."[26]

Overall, Socrates left the image of a loyal citizen. Not a rich man, but a man with a family, and a hoplite who served with distinction on the battlefield, taking part in three military campaigns in different parts of Greece during the Peloponnesian wars.

However, his reputation in Athens was that of a **social gadfly**: a person who interfered with the *status quo* by posing new, potentially upsetting questions to the community and

[24] Plato possibly invented that story, since the *Theaetetus* dates from 369 BCE, thirty years after his teacher's death. But scholars have pointed to the fact that maieutic was in fact used in earlier dialogues, though not within the same theoretical framework.
[25] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 2.15.
[26] Xenophon, *Symposium*, 2.10.

the authorities.[27] This is probably what led a group of Athenians to accuse him, in 399 BCE, of impiety and of corrupting the mind of the youth, two charges that seem to have been designed to silence him. Plato later put the following words in Socrates' mouth:

> For if you put me to death, you will not easily find another, who, to use a rather absurd figure, attaches himself to the city as a gadfly to a horse, which, though large and well bred, is sluggish on account of his size and needs to be aroused by stinging. I think the god fastened me upon the city in some such capacity, and I go about arousing, and urging and reproaching each one of you, constantly alighting upon you everywhere the whole day long. Such another is not likely to come to you, gentlemen; but if you take my advice, you will spare me. But you, perhaps, might be angry, like people awakened from a nap, and might slap me, as Anytus advises, and easily kill me; then you would pass the rest of your lives in slumber, unless God, in his care for you, should send someone else to sting you. And that I am, as I say, a kind of gift from the god, you might understand from this […].[28]

This image of the philosopher as a troublemaker, a consciousness-raiser, has endured to this day. It's the idea that people tend to fall asleep in their comfort zone, resting on what they know and believe they know, and that the philosopher always comes along to challenge these beliefs.

But at a time of political turmoil, when Athens was trying to recover from the defeat against Sparta and to regain independence, Socrates made enemies through the questions he addressed the Athenian democracy. According to Plato, Socrates criticized in particular the notion that "might makes right," and favoured the idea that justice did not depend on sheer power, but on other criteria such as virtue and harmony. Anyhow, at the end of his trial, Socrates was condemned to death. The Athenians gave him the honour to end his life by his own hand, drinking **hemlock**, a toxic plant.

The Death of Socrates, oil on canvas by French painter Jacques-Louis David, 1787.

[27] In French, the Greek word *mýops* is translated into "taon": like an insect that disturbs horses, such an individual wouldn't let others follow their dull habits without stinging them.
[28] Plato, *Apology*, 30e-31b.

If Socrates was condemned, we can infer that it must have been because people listened to him. So why did they? On the one hand, his ideas were new and contradicted many things taught by the sophists, until then haloed with prestige. On the other hand, the magnetism of Socrates' personality attracted to him a circle of younger men, some of whom, like Plato, would become his followers and ensure his legacy.

Now legendary, Socrates' appearance was widely remarked upon by the Greeks of his time. Plato for example compared him to a **torpedo ray**, a fish with ugly features, capable of stunning people with an electric shock. Here is an eloquent synthesis of what we know of Socrates' main features, from the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy:

> In Socrates's time beauty could easily be measured by the standard of the gods […]. Good looks and proper bearing were important to a man's political prospects, for beauty and goodness were linked in the popular imagination. The extant sources agree that Socrates was profoundly ugly, resembling a satyr more than a man—and resembling not at all the statues that turned up later in ancient times and now grace Internet sites and the covers of books. He had wide-set, bulging eyes that darted sideways and enabled him, like a crab, to see not only what was straight ahead, but what was beside him as well; a flat, upturned nose with flaring nostrils; and large fleshy lips like an ass. Socrates let his hair grow long, Spartan-style (even while Athens and Sparta were at war), and went about barefoot and unwashed, carrying a stick and looking arrogant. He didn't change his clothes but efficiently wore in the daytime what he covered himself with at night. Something was peculiar about his gait as well, sometimes described as a swagger so intimidating that enemy soldiers kept their distance. He was impervious to the effects of alcohol and cold weather, but this made him an object of suspicion to his fellow soldiers on campaign.[29]

Despite (or thanks to) this strange demeanour, a lot of people, friends and disciples, gathered around Socrates. Central to this attractiveness were of course his oratory skills. In the Athenian microcosm, where the agonistic spirit was a way to express one's worth, rhetoric and debates of ideas brought people together and would revolve around distinctive figures. Yet Socrates was not an emulator only in an intellectual way: he provoked the desire to speak, through **persuasion** and **seduction**. Younger men wanted to distinguish themselves in front of him; and some also wanted to have with him a homoerotic relationship, as was common at the time in Athens.

"Erotic" here does not relate only to sensuality, but to attracting someone's attention, favour or respect. **Eros** was the god of desire and love, relating to souls as much as bodies, and in fact we could easily misstep here by being too categorical. Indeed, the limit between a quest for knowledge and the desire to be acknowledged by a mentor, or by an audience (friends, colleagues, believers, fans, etc.), often seems very thin.

Yet, since homosexual relationships were then part of custom, they were also codified: a younger man would look to seduce a man of maturity and virtue, who would offer guidance in their first years of adulthood. And indeed, why would we look for wisdom, if we don't have a *desire* for it, and a *desire* to become like the people we think are wiser than us? Philosophy is not wisdom itself, but a movement towards wisdom.

[29] https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/socrates/#SocStr, accessed 15.11.2019.

The Sophists & the Virtuous

Socrates' battle against the sophists brings further **ambiguity** onto this character, since one could ask if he was not a sophist himself… and in that case the best of them?

Anyhow, it was from this quarrel that some of his strongest positions and arguments emerged. Several of Plato's dialogues bear the name of a famous sophist (e.g. Gorgias, Protagoras, Hippias, Cratylus); dialogues in which we can see how the sophists' respective positions presented Socrates and Plato with a **problem**.

Let us take the example of Gorgias. We remember that he ridiculed Parmenides by saying that "nothing exists" is just as valid a proposition as "everything exists," which meant revoking the possibility of any truth that would remain identical through time, and thus ultimately the possibility of any knowledge.

Gorgias posited that the only goal of any kind of speech is to convince. No statement is true or false *per se* (= in itself), but only in relation to its power of persuasion. Thus, one argument could be efficient one day and thus appear plausible (or even true)—but inefficient in other circumstances, and thus appear unplausible (or even false).

For Socrates, if we were to follow Gorgias, human affairs would be ruled by the persuasive power of an elite, that of the best rhetoricians who, conscious of their advantage, would sell their services to the highest bidder (aristocrats, tyrants, plutocrats, oligarchs, etc.); a critique that has been repeated time and again since then. By contrast, Socrates reputedly never presented himself as a teacher nor asked for money.

The danger for Socrates and Plato was that the sophists would drive the Athenian society away from better forms of government. A good society, according to them both, would emerge when every citizen would be striving to accomplish their own excellence. While in Gorgias' view of the world, one part of society would rule over the others, driven by self-interest, with no need for a common political goal.

Socrates attacked the sophists at the basis of their argumentation. They claimed that they could prove anything and its opposite, making all knowledge relative. But, Socrates argued, if you drink a heavy dose of poison, it will kill you whatever the context. Therefore some things are not only plausible, but true, and true at all times.

Who can give us reliable truths and provide us with understanding about human health for example? Certainly not the sophists, since they don't **authentically** possess that kind of knowledge. The sophists did not themselves experiment and understand the art of medicine: they only used the conclusions they heard from doctors, and, through rhetoric, made them more convincing, while at the same time appearing more important themselves. Hence Socrates' conclusion: even if the sophists actually defend something that is true, they are not using a knowledge of their own.

Therefore, the ones we should listen to are not the sophists, but the genuine experts. They know – and when they don't, should say so – because they alone have an authentic understanding of their art, be it medicine, masonry, or agriculture.

The sophists presented a vision of the world where power would befall those who could argue the most convincingly. Socrates answered that the **truth is ultimately more powerful than falsehood, because it is more efficient**. But if Socrates cornered the sophists and showed that their power was only a power over the appearances, he acknowledged it was a power nonetheless… Like Parmenides, Socrates thought that everything exists independently from us, but he integrated the power of the appearances to his theory: even something false – the sophists had proven that – could appear as true and impact one's life. Therefore, if we want to avoid deception when using the power of language, there is only one kind of speaker we should trust: **the virtuous one**, i.e. **the one who is striving morally towards being good and honest**.

Thus the notion that truth has more power than falsehood connected with the notion that **truth is right and that falsehood is wrong.** This was a major starting point for what we now call ethics or moral philosophy, which discusses behaviours and choices.

To the question 'How should one live?' Socrates answered that we must first know ourselves. A reminder of the inscription on the Temple of Apollo in Delphi…

We are, so to say, the best experts there could possibly be on that matter, since we experiment authentically what we are. In Plato's *Socrates*' words: "to talk every day about virtue and the other things about which you hear me talking and examining myself and others is the greatest good to man […] the unexamined life is not worth living."[30]

Dialectics, an Art of Searching

Socrates needed a new technique, a new manner of discussion that would allow him to get closer to the truth. Protagoras had invented an art called 'eristic,' meant to show the power of one rhetorician over another: whatever position the contestants would defend, their goal would be to refute their opponent. Socrates seems to have transformed this technique to serve his purpose. Thus **dialectics** was born, an art of searching for the truth through affirmation and refutation.

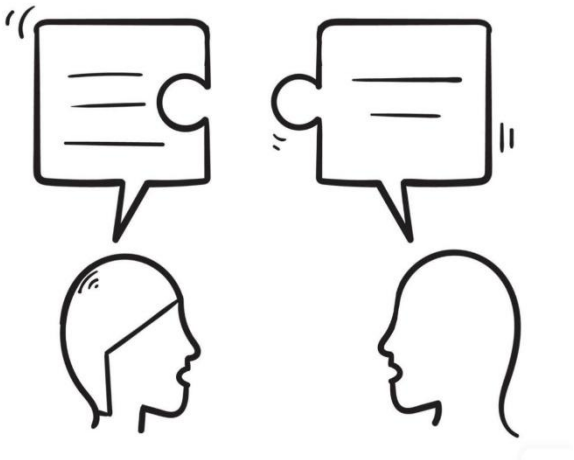
Two minds debating together reach further than one mind alone. By resisting and attracting each other, they create a tension. One would affirm, the other would question, and vice versa, examining each other's motives and arguments.

Socrates, feigning ignorance – the famous Socratic **irony** – pushed his interlocutors to the extremities of their reasoning, with the result that they would end up contradicting themselves. Socrates then turned their contradictions against them. His interlocutors

[30] Plato, *Apology*, 38a.

would be ashamed, because they didn't see it coming, and also because it could be so revealing. This technique of refutation (Greek ἔλεγχος, *elenkhos*) could be used in this fashion with the intention to expose one interlocutor's inconsistencies. But it could also be used in a constructive dialogue between two friends (*philia*), allowing them to establish the truth or falsehood of any particular thesis.

In such a debate, the participants would listen to each other and try to weigh the value of each argument. They would notice an error of logic or a fallacious reasoning. Each of them would focus on the discussion, questioning the implicit contents of their interlocutor's assertions. Little by little, they would push aside layers of opinions, of common sense, of beliefs, of prejudice and bias, trying to get to the root of the question.



In many occurrences of Plato's dialogues, this takes the shape of **a search for correct definitions**: by trying to define the notion that is at the centre of a debate (what is "justice", "love", "beauty", "good", "health", etc.) the interlocutors try to pave their way to the truth. Over time, their understanding becomes more rational and more explicit, until the moment both parties no longer have any doubts.

Yet truth might not appear at the first attempt and there are chances of not reaching a conclusion. A dialogue that stops in perplexity is called an ἀπορία (*aporía*), from ἀ- (a-) and πόρος (póros), meaning 'passage'. In other words, the dialogue ends in an impasse.

But even if a conclusion is reached, a dialectical exchange can then be tested, for example by trying to explain its result to someone who didn't take part in the debate; or by beginning a dialogue on the same topic anew with someone else, in order to see if the conclusions reached would be identical. Plato wrote several dialogues on the same subjects, which exemplifies the attitude of the philosopher.

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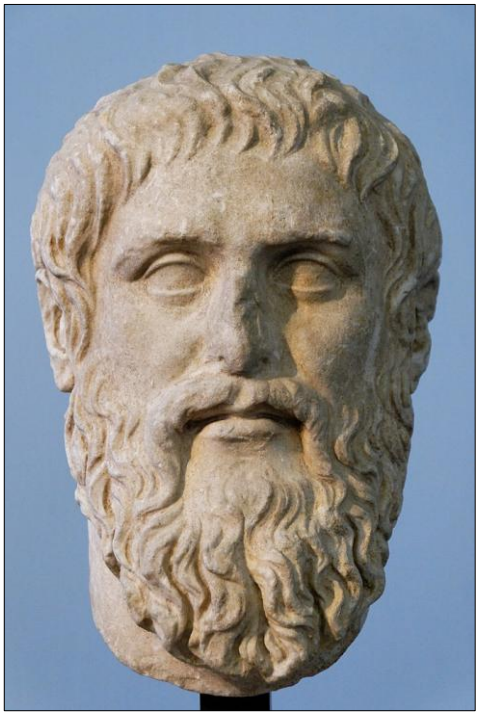
CHAPTER 6

PLATO

Foundations

Plato was born between 429 and 423 BCE into an upper class Athenian family. Both his parents belonged to the aristocracy: his father, Ariston, was believed to be a descendant of an Athenian king from the 11th century, while his mother, Perictione, was reputedly related to Solon, the famous lawmaker of the 6th century. After the death of Plato's father when the latter was still young, his mother remarried with a friend of Pericles, reinforcing already strong ties with the political powers in Athens.



Roman copy of the head of Plato made by Silanion, ca. 370 BC for the Academia in Athens

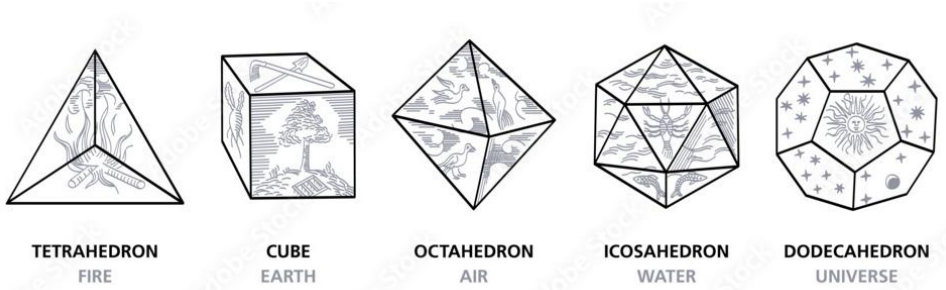
Given the wealth and advantages of his family, the young Plato would have been instructed by the best teachers of his time. He was described as a brilliant though modest student. Joining the physical to the intellectual, he became a proficient wrestler and took part in several tournaments. But foundational to the development of Plato's life and thinking was of course his encounter with Socrates in 408, and Socrates' condemnation to death in 399 — — which left his followers with a choice: to turn their backs on him or to hold the Athenians' decision in contempt.

Plato's first known dialogue, the *Apology of Socrates*, presents Socrates' defence during his trial in front of the 500 members of the Athenian court. A master orator, he confronts his three accusers and, though he loses the trial, wins the argumentation. Plato perceived the jury's decision as being motivated by other interests than the truth, with, in the background, the stakes of Athens' defeat against Sparta and its aftermath (one of Socrates' accusers, Lycon, would become a successful politician in the restored democracy). At the end, asked if he'd make concessions to appease the prejudice of the jury, Socrates did not compromise his integrity and was condemned, becoming one of the most famous figures of **self-sacrifice** for the sake of truth. Plato, in the years to come, would build upon this figure, writing several dialogues about his master's death and making use of this character as the spokesperson for his own views.

If we are to believe Diogenes Laërtius, Plato then sought to expand his philosophical horizon, **travelling** to meet all the most influential thinkers of the time:

> When Socrates was gone, [Plato] attached himself to Cratylus the Heraclitean, and to Hermogenes who professed the philosophy of Parmenides. Then at the age of twenty-eight, according to Hermodorus, he withdrew to Megara to Euclides, with certain other disciples of Socrates. Next he proceeded to Cyrene on a visit to Theodorus the mathematician, thence to Italy to see the Pythagorean philosophers Philolaus and Eurytus, and thence to Egypt to see those who interpreted the will of the gods […].[31]

His connection with **mathematics** appears clearly in several dialogues, and in particular with geometry, which presents demonstrations that can be repeated with an identical result. One of his last dialogues – the *Timaeus* – seems to indicate that Plato was probably initiated into the Pythagorean school of thought (cf. the 'Platonic solids'). The connection between mathematics and philosophy would have a huge impact, from Euclid in Egypt to the Arabic philosophers, and from Galileo to Isaac Newton. Yet beyond mathematics, geometry was at the time strongly connected to religion: sacred geometry, i.e. giving esoteric meanings to geometrical shapes, was used in Egypt and several other ancient cultures, as it would be later in the construction of Christian cathedrals, or even more recently for example with the Louvre pyramid built in the 1980's.



Platonic solids and the classical elements. Regular polyhedrons and assignments to the elements, as shown by Kepler in 1596. He named the fifth element universe, also known as aether or quintessence.

Plato settled back in Greece when he was 40, and, in Athens, founded a philosophical school that would remain famous throughout the centuries. He called it, from its location in the Grove of Academos, **the Academy**. There, Plato and his followers shared a common table and engaged in mathematics, dialectics, politics, music and other studies.

Till his death circa 347 BCE, Plato devoted himself to teaching and writing. A total of **35 dialogues and 13 letters** is what remains of Plato's works. With subjects as diverse as the immortality of the soul, love, justice, the gods, knowledge, courage, family, government, arts and myths, Plato was one of the most prolific and innovative thinkers of Antiquity. However, it has been argued by many contemporary specialists that the essential part of Plato's teachings was in fact **oral**: the written dialogues could be but a trace of all the discussions and speeches which took place at the Academy.

What remains the most striking is how Plato found himself at the crossroads of so many important currents of thought (Parmenides, Heraclitus, Pythagoras, Gorgias, Protagoras,

[31] Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, III, 6.

Socrates, etc.), delivering a formal synthesis that would have an astounding and lasting influence over philosophy until today, more than two thousand years later.

A Political Philosopher

The period that followed the restoration of democracy in Athens was one of constant and inconclusive warfare between the Greek city-states, with first one and then another achieving a brief hegemony, but none managing to bring unity to Greece. This was the context in which Plato's political philosophy was to emerge.

Plato was a harsh critic of Athens' obsession with conquest and maritime **imperialism**: in his view, Athens, because of this thirst for honour and wealth, was losing sight of what should have been its goal: to attain excellence in all things. He wrote: "Not moderation and uprightness, but harbours, and dockyards, and walls, and tribute-money, and such nonsense, were what they filled the city with." (*Gorgias*, 519a)

His **critique of democracy** departs from the same premises. While democracy is the namesake for the 'power of the people', in Plato's view this power didn't exert itself through reason, but through appetites. More and more Athenian leaders came from the lower classes and made a name for themselves through their ability to convince citizens and the democratic parliament. This is one of the reasons for Plato's severe critique of the sophists. Other city-states, like Sparta, were supporters of aristocracy, which was also why the democratic/populist Athenian leaders were the most violent advocates of the war against Sparta… while the aristocracy of Athens showed less enthusiasm for it.

The Greek historian Thucydides wrote about this time of strife. He noted how language used by the *demos*, and especially their leaders, was affected by the changes in government and political orientation: "In justifying their actions, they reversed the customary descriptive **meanings of words**." For example, 'recklessness' became 'patriotism' and 'obstinacy' became 'courage.' From this remark, we understand why Plato gave such an importance to re-defining notions, in the footsteps of Socrates.[32]

> In Greek, two elements encompass the composition of most names of political organisation: ἄρχε (*árkhe*) meaning 'rule, command' – used in words like monarchy ('the rule of one'), patriarchy ('the rule of the fathers'), anarchy ('the absence of ruler'), oligarchy ('the rule of the few'), – and κράτος (*krátos*) meaning 'rule, strength', in words like democracy ('of the people'), aristocracy ('of the best'), plutocracy ('of the wealthy'), theocracy ('of god'), autocracy ('of oneself'), bureaucracy ('of the administrators') and technocracy ('of the experts'). The meaning of such words has been modified by the ones who used them, their connotation being positive here, negative there. For example, the word hierarchy, which translates literally into 'the rule of the sacred,' was born from a religious context, but its use was then extended

[32] J. B. White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, University of Chicago Press, 1985. The same observation was made by the philologist Victor Klemperer during the rise of Hitler's national-socialism in the 1930s, and by George Orwell in his dystopian novel *1984*.

to describe any organisation based on relationships of subordination which have been defined through very diverse criteria (age, gender, physical strength, wealth, origin, race, culture, position, success, diplomas, etc.), relative to their use in a particular context.

Plato's only active intervention in politics happened before he was 40. He went to **Syracuse**, Sicily, where he became close to Dion, a cousin and advisor of Dionysus I, ruler of the city. Dion became Plato's pupil and absorbed his doctrine. Plato then returned to Athens where he would found the Academy; but some 20 years later, Dion's nephew – Dionysus II – was to succeed his father on the throne, and Dion called Plato to his side with the hope that the latter would be able to turn the young ruler into a "philosopher king." It seems Plato had little hope that this would work... still, how could he not try? Upon his arrival, the young Dionysus II was prone to drinking and ruled as a tyrant; but his conversations with Plato had significant effects on him: he distanced himself from the libertine behaviours of the court and announced that he wanted to change the form of the government, which would eventually lead to many opposing him and sowing mistrust between him and Dion. As a result, Dion lost the favour of the king and was exiled. For Plato, this meant the end of his Syracusian adventure. But not for Dion: years later, he came back, led a rebellion against Dionysus II and won. Opposed to democracy and seduced by power, Dion ended up ruling as a tyrant, until his assassination.

The Philosopher as Educator

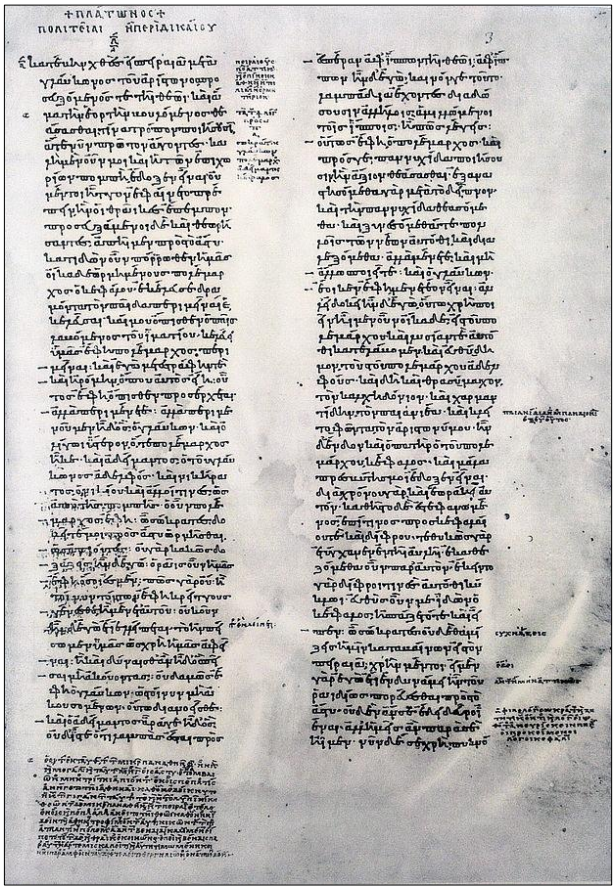
In one of his major works, *The Republic* (Greek: Πολιτεία, *Politeia*, which means "the community of citizens"; it was translated into Latin: *Res Publica,* which means "the public thing"), Plato presents a wide array of propositions concerning politics, i.e. how to organize a society. After a discussion about the true nature of **justice**, the dialogue moves toward the foundation of an ideal city-state.

For Plato, justice only exists when humans strive to develop their nature towards excellence (Greek: ἀρετή, *aretḗ*, often translated as "virtue"[33]). It is not an individual but a collective matter: no justice can be attained if the humans who compose a society are divided and envious of each other. In order to attain such balance, every force within society should be oriented and understood in their right **function**. Justice is attained when

[33] The word 'virtue' comes from the Latin *virtus*, which is derived from *vir*, meaning 'man.' The same goes for the Greek word for courage, *andreia*, derived from *andros*. With consideration to the historical context, we should not be surprised: men enjoyed many more rights than women both in Ancient Greece and in Ancient Rome. If only males were full citizens, and if political speeches were directed towards citizens, then it would be towards men that the rhetoric of 'how to be a good citizen' was directed. These words, however, by excluding women, also mark a political will to maintain the *status quo*. This is the reason why the English word 'excellence' – rather than 'virtue' – seems preferable in order to translate the Greek *aretḗ* in our modern context. 'Excellence' comes from the Latin *excellō* = "I raise up," "I elevate myself."

everyone knows their function (like in an orchestra with many musicians) and performs it excellently.

As a consequence, justice is never attained once and for all, but its realisation depends on the constant quest for harmony between the different forces that are active within a society. In that regard, one of the strength of Plato's vision was to create a bridge between the individual and the social levels: drawing a parallel between a just society and a just individual soul, he posited that only justice can lead to a happy individual life, while injustice leads to wretchedness.[34]



Title page of the oldest complete manuscript of *The Republic.* Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Gr. 1807 (late 9th century)

If harmony is ever to be attained, there is therefore a need for individuals who would assume a new function in society: **the guardians**, i.e. philosophers who would be tasked with providing good laws and models. Constitutive of a new kind of aristocracy, an aristocracy of the soul, they would lead society towards excellence and justice.

At the very basis of Plato's ideal city, thus lies **the education of the guardians** and **of the soul**. From the cradle to their maturity, the guardians need to be educated in order to develop their intellectual capacity. For example, they would learn mathematics, because mathematics are "provocative of thought" (524d) and are good training for the soul. They would not use arithmetic like shopkeepers would, "with a view to buying or selling, but for the sake of their military use, and of the mind itself; and because this will be the easiest way for it to pass from the world of becoming to that of truth and reality." Since mathematical relations are always true, they are good for training the guardians to turn their souls towards true knowledge.

For Plato, truth cannot be understood by our senses alone, since, as Heraclitus showed, our senses present us with a world that is constantly changing. The only truth that our soul can know is that of the reality of what-is, which Parmenides described by expressing the principle of identity. In the same way that 24+26 always add up to 50, Plato maintains that the soul, which brings life to the body, can neither be the cause of death nor itself be

[34] "[I]t is better in every way to be just than to be unjust" (357a).

mortal, since this would contradict the fact that it brings life. The soul would thus – logically – be devoid of all mortality, i.e. immortal (cf. *Phaedo*, 106b). Thus, turning our soul towards the truth would lead us to understand at the same time that our soul is immortal.

For Plato, it is by legislators who cultivate this love of wisdom that the city should be governed, so that it improves over time, enduring in spite of an ever-changing world. On the contrary, if a city were governed by lies, given over to self-interest and the manipulations of sophists, it would be doomed to corruption and tyranny. This is why the education of guardians is central to Plato's political vision. Do the guardians possess the truth? No, because they must constantly re-evaluate reality in order to grasp the most harmonious relationship. Their entire lives are devoted to developing their '**philosophical instinct**' (376a), defined as the ability to distinguish between what one knows and what one does not know, constantly seeking to know the world better and to act better.

Last but not least, Plato affirmed that **women** are to be chosen to become guardians on an equal footing with men. Planning to give women the same function as men, Plato then argues that "[i]f, then, we use the women for the same things as the men, they must also be taught the same things." (451d) In a revolutionary way, Plato, taking his thinking to its logical end, didn't hesitate to upend the Athenian gender roles of his time.

Types, Imitation and Censorship

The Republic discusses what part of what art/technique is the most valuable for this education, and what models of excellence should be given to the future guardians.

The Greek for 'model' is τύπος (*túpos*), which literally means 'mark, engraving.' The notion is close to that of mould, i.e. a form for shaping matter. Quite remarkably, the Greek word has changed very little in contemporary English ("type"), French ("type") and German ("Typ"). It has remained, since Plato, a central notion in politics in general, and in education in particular. What **models** are to be imitated by children, pupils, students, learners of all kind? What is the 'type' of a good citizen? What are the models of beauty, of good behaviour, of lifestyle, etc. that we tend to follow and mimic?

The very notion of model, to be efficient, presupposes a specific capacity on the part of children and humans more generally: **imitation**. In Ancient Greek, μίμησις (*mimesis*) designates the aptitude to observe and replicate any kind of gesture, behaviour, speech or idea. The word was first used for the theatre: actors would mimic the real in order to make their play *seem* real. It was also used by the philosopher Democritus, who said that human beings imitate nature in their crafts; for example when weaving nets they imitate the spider. But Plato would extend this notion to all human behaviours, with humans not only imitating nature, but first of all, other human beings and what he called Ideas.

In Plato's theory of education, *mimesis* concerns every art and craft, and every physical activity, including athletics and warfare: only by imitating someone who knows – a master, a teacher, an expert – can we learn, perfect our know-how and finally become in turn a

model for a new apprentice. **Children** are not any different, except in that they are more malleable and cannot choose what they would like to learn or not. Thus, the education they will receive depends on the choices of the society and/or the family they are born into—choices that can be adequately termed as cultural: it is about cultivating behaviours, favouring certain traits and rejecting others. This is where Plato's theory comes into play, as wisdom is presented as *selection*.

How can a human being be made into a guardian, an ideal citizen-ruler? The children selected must, first and foremost, possess the germ of the philosophical instinct, and must then only be exposed to true types. For example, they should only listen to "true stories," because imitation of the true models from an early age would teach their soul to know how to make the difference between what they know and what they don't, between what is logical and what is not – thus developing their *philosophical nature*.

In Ancient Greece, the ones who created stories were **the poets**, like Homer (the author of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, two major epic poems from the 8th century BCE) and Hesiod (famous for his *Theogony*, a collection of myths narrating the lives of the gods). But Plato criticized poets for telling *false* stories, and would have liked to impose this choice on them: either write true stories, or be banished from his ideal city. From this stems the notion that Plato was the father of **censorship**… but, since banishment was a common practice in Athens and in other countries, this affirmation seems irrelevant. What we can assert is that Plato was probably the first one to talk critically about censorship and models.

> 'To critique' comes from the Greek word κρίνειν (krínein), meaning 'to separate, to decide'. The activity of the critic consists in applying a filter to opinions and ideas, in order to test them and retain only some of them. The result of such an activity therefore depends on the **criteria** that are used to do the filtering.

What then are the **criteria** Plato applied to differentiate true stories from false ones? Let's take an example. The stories in which the gods transform themselves into animals (e.g. Zeus transforming into a swan or a bull to seduce a woman) are judged to be untrue and misleading, since – Plato argues – the gods are perfect beings and thus could not transform themselves into animals, considered to be imperfect beings. Since gods *are* perfect, and since 'perfection' cannot be more or less perfect, it is untrue to assert that the gods would transform into animals, because then perfection would not be perfection anymore but "more or less perfect", which is impossible. The criterion here is a **logical** one, based on Parmenides' principle of identity. True stories are thus *dialectically tested stories*, made to enhance the capacity to differentiate a true proposition from a false one, to teach the soul how to turn itself towards true understanding.

The Theory of the Tripartite Soul

The ideal city-state of course wouldn't be composed solely of guardians. Plato envisioned three classes, whose qualities and deeds stem from the function each of them would exert. In turn, each function depends upon the preferential development of one of

the **three human capacities** that Plato thought were at work in every human being: reason, spirit and appetite. Each capacity would have to be driven towards its own excellence. To strive towards excellence, would then be also to excel in one's function.

From these premises, Plato draws the plan of an organisation of society. At the top are the guardians, they are the philosophers who make the laws; and since the laws are nothing if nobody obeys them, the other classes are to be subordinated to them. However, in Plato's vision, since the laws created by good guardians would be just, and since everyone would be just by obeying a just law, obedience is a matter of excellence, not of submission. Making citizens obey by force would from the outset constitute a degradation of political relations and of the human soul.

To complete this plan, Plato uses the human body as an analogy to describe the hierarchy of the functions in the ideal city and in the excellent soul.

At the **head** of the city-state are **the guardians**, also named the philosopher-kings. Not one individual, but a collection of selected men and women who would rule together in a college and philosophise in order to never lose sight of justice. They are to have no knowledge of their biological parents, and their reproduction is to be regulated by the state. They are forbidden property of any kind, to preclude the risk that their decisions be motivated by their personal interests. The capacity they are associated with and that they have to develop more than others is **reason** (νοῦς, *noûs*), i.e. the ability to use discourse (*logos*) and thus to judge adequately and differentiate truth from falsehood. The excellence in reason is **wisdom** (*sophia*).

The second class in Plato's ideal society are **the auxiliaries**, whose function is twofold: to protect the city-state from its enemies outside the walls and to enforce the laws of the city within its walls. The auxiliaries are associated with the **heart**, which represents the spirited part of human beings[35]. **Spirit** (*thumos*) here speaks about our emotional agency: it is the part of us that gets angry when we witness an injustice being done, or that would, in the face of adversity, feel hopeless or challenged. Just like we can recognise the word 'motion' in 'emotion,' the spirited part moves us to act. Its excellence is **courage** (*andreia*), that we can also understand as **determination** (towards a goal, or to maintain an attitude) allowing us to align our behaviour with reason and moderate our appetites.

The third class are **the producers**, comprised of merchants, farmers and all craftsmen necessary to the development of an autonomous society. They are associated with the **stomach** and the **genitals**, which figure the appetitive part of human nature. **Appetites** (*epithumia*) are the engine of instinctive life, and must be contained and mastered in order not to cause destruction through excess (*hubris*). Thus the excellence that must be applied to the appetitive part is **moderation** (*sophrosune*, also translated into 'temperance').

[35] The translation into "spirit" is quite unique to English, since in French *thumos* is usually translated into "volonté".

Appetites are not to be confused with **desires**. An appetite produces an instinctive movement necessary to keep up organic life, while the word "desire" designates this movement itself. The spirited part of the human being also *desires* (e.g. to be kind, to take revenge, etc.), and so does the reasonable part (e.g. to know something).

Desire – in Greek ἔρως (*érōs*)[36] – is manifested differently in each of the three capacities of the soul. In reason, desire stems from beliefs or knowledge about what is true or false, right or wrong ("I will do this because I know this is just"). But spirit and appetite are of a different nature, so that spirited and/or appetitive desires can move us independently of any knowledge concerning what is right and wrong.

Together, appetite and spirit produce the strongest desires,[37] but they are to be **mastered**, in Plato's view, by reason, so as to be driven on the right and true path. Thus the hierarchy of the ideal city mirrors the one that leads the human soul to harmony.

Soul	Body	Interest	Class	Excellence	
Reason	Head	Knowledge	Guardians (philosophers)	Wisdom	Justice (Harmony)
Spirit	Heart	Honor	Auxiliaries (army and police)	Courage	
Appetites	Guts	Pleasure	Commoners (farmers, merchants,...)	Moderation	

For harmony to become a reality, members of each class must strive to excel in the development of their specific potential: the guardians (reason) towards wisdom, the auxiliaries (spirit) towards courage, the producers (appetites) towards moderation. Yet, every citizen, whatever their class, is an embodied soul composed of these three potentials, and so must also strive for each one's excellence. This is how a group of human beings, forming a city, can achieve true justice, which is excellence in political life. That is also the way to reach happiness – εὐδαιμονίᾱ (*eudaimoníā*) – the excellence of the soul. What it means deeply, is that all aspects of human lives are deeply interconnected and interwoven, and that a harmonious society cannot exist if individuals do not desire what is good, not only for their own self-interest, but for the living-together of all.

To return to the three functions, if one of them fails in its task, society as a whole is in danger: the **reign of excellence** is transformed into **timocracy** (when the elite give priority to conquest and honours), then degenerates into **oligarchy** (when those in power give

[36] Anne Carson, a contemporary poet and Greek scholar, wrote that "Desire moves. Eros is a verb." In *Eros the Bittersweet*, Princeton University Press, 1986.

[37] In 2013, the team of Pr. Lauri Nummenmaa from the Department of Biomedical Engineering and Computational Science and Brain Research Unit in the University of Aalto in Finland, drew a *Bodily maps of emotion* using a topographical self-reporting method. They proposed "that emotions are represented in the somatosensory system as culturally universal categorical somatotopic maps. Perception of these emotion-triggered bodily changes may play a key role in generating consciously felt emotions." Plato's notions of *thumos* and *epithumia* overlap in this modern understanding of what qualifies as an emotion.
Source: https://www.pnas.org/content/111/2/646, accessed 5.12.2019.

priority to property and wealth), then into **democracy** (when producers are free to produce what they want, which soon leads them to become slaves to their own appetites), finally giving way to **tyranny** (by promising the oligarchs power and the producers freedom, an individual reaches the head of state by corrupting everyone's potential).

Rivalry for the Truth

Let us recap by reviewing the rivals that Plato had in mind when he asserted the superiority of his research method and political organisation.

His first rivals were **the sophists**, who, through the perfected art of rhetoric, secured an important place in Athens' public debates and the judiciary. Plato was concerned by the way the sophists were, in his view, destroying society by defending contradictory positions, thus giving way to relativism. From there came the value Plato gave to ideal types in education, and the building of a social order that would be based on the quest for excellence. But then, undeniably, Plato used rhetoric himself. In his view, the difference between his method and the sophists' resides in that, **1)** the latter are more interested in money and glory than in the truth, and so their work is biased, **2)** they do not identify 'what is true' with 'what is right' (cf. Chapter 5), and **3)** their speeches are not based on dialectical deliberation, but on what is likely to convince an audience (plausibility), so their reasonings are often fallacious and would prove ineffective in the long term, even if they may be successful in the short term.

His second rivals were **the poets**, inventors of myths. Greek tradition expressed many of its customary truths in stories telling the fate of gods and heroes. While Plato himself used a number of myths and allegories in his dialogues to showcase one particular aspect of a problem, he argued that he didn't present them as truths but only as ways to access truths more intuitively. For Plato, a myth by itself is nothing without the dialectical keys to understand it, and it is within this scope that they can be useful in order to teach and habituate the souls to look in the direction of true knowledge. But in the end, what matters is what they show: Plato did not accuse Homer and Hesiod of lying, since he, too, used fabricated stories and since stories never tell the truth; he accused them of creating stories that were contradictory, illogical and therefore misleading.

Last but not least, another rival were **the people**, more specifically the common opinions, called *δόξα* (*dóxa*). In Plato's works, this word describes the language and popular prejudices upon which everyday communication is based. Here is the situation: everyone thinks that they are entitled to the truth, everyone has some 'knowledge' about this or that; but these opinions are, from Plato's perspective, more often than not the product of immoderate appetites, loose spirits and unwise reasoning. Therefore we should not take for true anything of the kind, without first deliberating dialectically about it. For example, people tend to believe some statements only because someone famous or powerful said they were true, because they are shared by many people, or because they give them a moral or a prospective advantage (cf. "Techniques and Biases" in Chapter 4). With this in

mind, we also understand why Plato thought that democracy was one of the worst forms of government: governed by opinions (*doxa*) rather than truth.

For Plato, people who live according to the *doxa* actually live "in the dark"—and have all the more chances of being deceived, because the arguments of the sophists are based on the *doxa*. They rely on what is commonly accepted, in order to convince more easily, and on what is desired, in order to better seduce.

The Allegory of the Cave

The allegory of the cave in *The Republic* (514a–520a) is probably the most popular of Plato's pieces. It seems all the more necessary to question the presuppositions and symbols that Plato used in order to create it.

The allegory is built upon an analogy coming from time immemorial, associating the obscurity of the night with ignorance, deception and doubt, and the light of day with knowledge, discovery and certainty. The analogy seems to be linked with an experience that all human beings have made: feeling powerless in the dark, because our sense of sight – on which we rely so much – is then quite useless.

> Religious and symbolic representations of all cultures have made of the sun a major figure, closely tied to the cycles of the moon. While the sun always shows the same shape, the moon changes and therefore came to symbolise the changing aspects of nature (tides, vegetation, etc.). Around the world, some cultures identify the sun as female and the moon as male[38], while others do the opposite. In Greece, like in most Indo-European cultures, the sun (*Helios*) was male, and the moon (*Selene*) was female, and this participated in the construction of gender identities.
>
> It is important to keep in mind how such **metaphors** could compel us to think fallaciously, for example by asserting general statements like "men are more stable and more reliable than women," or "women have a stronger connection to nature than men." Yet, these metaphors would produce powerful effects over time, by legitimating certain behaviours, in words and deeds. Typically, the associative chains truth≈light≈male and deception≈obscurity≈female have led to justify the subordination of women to men in many societies (= patriarchy), and/or to persecute, exile and murder stigmatized groups (e.g. "witches" in Europe, 13th-19th CE).

In the allegory of the cave, Plato draws from such symbolism: without the light of the sun, humans are unable to see anything clearly; without the light of what-is-good (in things or in actions), humans are unable to understand anything truly. In the next chapter we will develop Plato's theory of Ideas culminating with the Idea of the good, a theory that is the

[38] For example, in Japanese Shinto religion, the sun is figured by a goddess (*Amateratsu*), and the moon by a god (*Tsukuyomi*). This is also the case in German and Norse traditions, in Celtic insular culture, in Ancient Egypt, among several Native American people, etc.

analogue of the setup depicted in the allegory. But first, let us describe the allegory of the cave itself, the story it tells and what further meaning it holds for us.

The prisoners of the cave figure human beings in their ordinary condition. They think, speak and act according to the shadows (≡ opinions, *doxa*) that they see on the wall, which they believe to be the real things. Plato shows on the contrary that the shadows are only projections of artificial objects manipulated by a group of people (≡ sophists, politicians, poets, etc. *and* the ones who can pay them in order to profit from their talents). Note that the puppeteers don't go outside of the cave either.

Plato then considers what would happen if one of the prisoners were freed and led out of the cave. The metaphor of light goes on: the ex-prisoner is at first **blinded** by sunlight, he must habituate his eyes and little by little is able to see the real objects, then the sun. He has discovered the truth – and the shadows of the cave now appear to him for what they are: falsehood and lies – so he decides to go back into the cave to share his discovery.

This time he is blinded by darkness, since he is not used anymore to the obscurity; and that will seem a good reason for the other prisoners to doubt him: how could anybody who is incapable of seeing what is for them evident (the shadows that *they* see) be able to tell them the truth? They come to the conclusion that they know better than he does; so, when he tries to free them from their chains, they decide to stop him and kill him. In Plato's mind, this resonated of course with **Socrates' fate** at the hands of the Athenian democrats: he brought them the light, and they sentenced him to death. In the centuries to come, this aspect of the allegory would be used frequently as a metaphor for the strong inertia of the people, who would rather continue to believe in convenient lies rather that open their eyes to the truth and strive for true justice.

It means also that, for Plato, there is no use in attempting to free the prisoners, since they prefer the security of the cave to a risky adventure outside. Unlike the philosophers of the Enlightenment (18th century CE), Plato did not believe that the task of the philosopher was to free the people by providing them knowledge. Instead, he envisioned another solution: to **educate** a group of people into a certain function – the guardians (or philosopher-kings) – so that they would create just laws, thus driving society as a whole towards harmony.

However, Plato also thought that excellence must be attained by each one according to their function. If the auxiliaries and the producers don't need to have the same training in philosophical matters as the guardians do, a harmonious society can only exist when the three classes, actively **interdependent**, are all striving towards their own excellence.

What remains to understand is how Plato used the story of the prisoners as an analogue to help us figure out his theory of Ideas. To understand how this story is an **allegory**, we have to link each of its elements to an element of Plato's theory.

The shadows on the wall represent the common opinions we have about things and actions (e.g. a tree, justice…), which are projected on the screen of our mind by our appetites. The artificial objects in the allegory represent the real objects in the theory of Ideas. So when prisoners get free and go out of the cave, in the theory of Ideas they leave behind their opinions based on sensuous experience, and open the eye of their souls in order to understand intellectually what the things truly are. What is truly a tree? We can't know this, says Plato, just by looking at particular trees, one after the other: we have to understand intellectually what "the tree" is; and to understand what "the tree" is, we have to understand what a *good* tree is, i.e. one that can live and grow.

Allegory of the Cave	Theory of Ideas
The sun	The Idea of the Good
Real objects (tree, table, etc.)	The Ideas (justice, tree, etc.)
Shadows of the real objects	Mathematical demonstrations
The fire in the cave	The sun
Artificial objects (statues, …)	Real objects
Shadows on the wall	Representations (*doxa*, myths, fallacious arguments, paintings, etc.)

Let's take another example, the circle. At the very bottom of the scale is the *representation* of a circle, drawn on a board for example: it's not an exact circle, it only looks like one. Next comes the concrete circle, such as a wheel, or a compass circle: more precise, but still imperfect, and still not *understood*. Then comes the mathematical definition: "A circle is a figure made up of all the points on a plane at a given distance from a given point, the center": this puts us well on the way to understanding what a circle is, but it's still not the circle itself. We arrive eventually at the understanding of what the circle is, at the Idea of circle: our intellect grasps it immediately, without the need of a definition; and if we understand it as such, it is because we have also begun to understand that only the good circle is, indeed, a circle. "Illuminated" by the Idea of good – that shines in all things understandable – we understand truly what a circle is. (We will further develop the notions of 'Idea' and 'Idea of good' in the next chapter.)

*

Last but not least, the allegory of the cave can also be read as **a commentary on the transmission of knowledge**. For us today, who know so little about Plato's times, his words are like shadows in a cave. How can we know more precisely what he meant? We can study the language he used, the history, the politics, the beliefs and the arts of his time. But even with all these tools, we cannot go to him and ask a direct question. Therefore, we are always at risk of misinterpreting his thoughts. Plato himself made that critique in the *Phaedrus* (274b-276a), by telling a myth on **the invention of writing**. He concluded that to rely only on what others have written – rather than on one's own understanding and memory – presents an important risk:

> Trust in writing will make them remember things by relying on marks made by others, from outside themselves, not on their own inner resources, and so writing will make the things they have learnt disappear from their minds.[39]

This also asks **the question of reliability**, for example with books and newspapers. Should we believe in anything, just because it is written? Of course not. Every journalist for example will need to overlap sources in order to assert that their news is correct, and in the same way, whatever we read must be looked at with a critical eye.

What about cinema and TV, photos and videos, since they show the real "directly"? Plato's allegory is in fact even more pertinent here, if we think how cave-like movie theatres are—and the same can be said of any screen: computers, tablets and smartphones. The images we watch, using our sense of sight, are human-made objects, and (without even speaking of photo editing programs, special effects, and artificial intelligence enhanced software) we must always look into what the ones who 'manipulate' the camera or the program are doing in matters of framing, lighting and editing. If the pictures are accompanied by music, and/or by a narrative, we will also ask ourselves how these added layers tend to modify the meaning of the images.

An AI generated image made in 2020 on Artbreeder.com, based on a sculpture of Plato's bust, itself a Roman copy of the sculpture made by Silanion, a Greek sculptor who lived in the 4th c. BCE in Athens and possibly made it looking at the real Plato.

In the end, whatever we let into our soul can become, just like the voices that echo in Plato's cave, the meaning we believe in. We therefore need to exert special care in how we choose our sources of information, to compare and double-check, and, most importantly, to rely on **our own capacity to understand**.

[39] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 274d, trans. by Robin Waterfield, 2002.

The Theory of Ideas

Let us take an even closer look now at what is called since Antiquity the theory of Ideas, often translated into English as the theory of Forms.[40]

While Plato used a variety of words to designate the Ideas, the most common are ἰδέα (*idéa*, "notion, pattern") and εἶδος (*eîdos*, "form, face"), both derived from the verb εἴδομαι (*eídōmai*, "to see"). In Plato's philosophy, the **Ideas** are what can be seen with **the eye of the soul**. As intellectual objects, they appear to us as forms, shapes or patterns: for example, when we think about 'justice,' what we 'see' is a configuration of different elements that are linked together with meaning and logic (*logos*).

Example. Let us look at one particular table: how come can we understand it **as** a table? 1) We can understand it as a table because it is possible to use this particular object according to the content of the **function** 'table': we can sit around it and eat on it, or write on it. This object responds positively to the function-table, and this response makes up for our understanding of it *as* a table. 2) Of course, we know that some tables are better "tables" than others: as objects, they respond better to the function-table (we can make a better use of them *as* tables). Therefore, our understanding of what is a table, can only be at the same time an understanding of what a **good** table is. And this is what Plato calls the Idea of the table: understanding what a good table is. 3) But we must be careful here, because the 'good' in the Idea is not understood by comparing different object-tables: this would be only exchanging opinions about tables. Instead, Plato thought that understanding the Idea of table depends on us looking towards the Idea of good. It is by looking towards it that, through careful dialectical examination, we will be able to 'see' the Idea of table, thanks to the goodness that 'enlightens' it. In other words, truly understanding something stands for understanding how that thing is manifestly good. 4) Convertibly, it is impossible to have a true understanding of what a bad table is, since for Plato 'bad' is only the absence of good; therefore the content of 'bad' cannot be determined. A lamp is a bad table, but so is a gust of wind or a meteorite. One could speculate on what is worse a table, between a lamp and a meteorite, but that would be exchanging opinions. Understanding the 'bad' in something would only come down to cancelling the possibility to understand what this thing is altogether.

To understand what is the Idea of justice seems more complex. It is not only a certain notion of justice, like there could be thousands. The Idea of justice is an understanding of justice **in the light of how justice is good**. We could ask: why would we look for the Idea of justice, rather than for an opinion about justice? And answer: because we would have understood that the good does not concern only "me, right now" but everyone, in every situation. Opinions about justice vary from one person to the next, depending on each

[40] The expression "theory of Ideas" comes from a long tradition, starting with Cicero, continuing with Diogenes Laërtius and later with German philosophy until today. We use this expression rather than that of the "theory of Forms" in order to keep up with this tradition, and will use the capital 'I' in order to differentiate Plato's Ideas from the common meaning of the word.

person's interest, an interest that can change from one moment to the next. But the Idea of justice is the understanding of how justice is good for anyone, at any time.

However, understanding what justice truly is does not mean that we will be able to create perfect justice within the city, since only our understanding can grasp it fully (hence the saying that "only justice is just"). For Plato, what the Idea of justice gives us, then, is the **model, the intellectual form** for creating the best laws we could create.

!! the Idea is our understanding: we always change, and so does our understanding (in which words, what exact shape, etc.) yet this relation never changes

Let us read again the passage where Plato makes his allegory explicit:

> This entire allegory, I said, you may now append, dear Glaucon, to the previous argument; the prison-house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun, and you will not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upwards to be the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world according to my poor belief, which, at your desire, I have expressed—whether rightly or wrongly God knows. But, whether true or false, my opinion is that **in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort**; and, when seen, is also **inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right**, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual; and that this is the power upon which he who would act rationally either in public or private life must have his eye fixed.[41]

As we have seen, it is easier to understand first what a table is by understanding the function that defines a table. It is more difficult to get that our understanding of what a function is, depends on our understanding of what good is. But once we would have understood this, we would take the path in the opposite way: understanding what the good is, and through this understanding, understanding what a table is, would be the way to build good tables. And tables built that way would be better tables than if we would not have understood what the good is and how and why it matters to us all.

Conversely, when we look at objects, we can now determine how close they are to the Idea, i.e. to the understanding we have formed of that object. We can do the same for all kinds of human acts, for example the laws of the city, by asking: how close are they to the Idea of justice? Without ever forgetting that the thinking person, turned towards the good, forms the Idea of justice at the very moment of understanding it: the Idea is the act of understanding, and therefore presents different aspects (or faces) from moment to

[41] Plato, *The Republic*, 517a, trans. by Benjamin Jowett.

moment. The act of understanding is always the same, but what is understood differs in appearance due to the variety of human existences.

The Two "Places"

This calls in turn for a final remark upon our capacity to understand different sort of realities: the reality we can access through our senses, and the reality we can access through our intellect.

Plato's philosophy led him to differentiate between **two "places"** (Greek: τόπος, *tópos*): the sensible place and the intellectual place[42]. On the one hand, the sensible is, as in Heraclitus' vision, always changing. Hence, any kind of knowledge that we could acquire through observation could not be absolutely certain, but only relative and subjected to change. Plato called this kind of knowledge opinion (*doxa*).

On the other hand, the intellectual place is deathless. This is where truths exist, unchanging Ideas (i.e. the true understanding of something applies to any timely occurrence of that thing, e.g. the Idea of circle). Because they are always true, Plato thought that the Ideas must exist *independently* from the changing phenomena. And if they exist independently, then they are – so to say – *somewhere*, in a 'place' which the soul can access. When the soul does, it can 'see' the Ideas, which means that it has a true intellectual understanding of things, i.e. a knowledge that is certain.

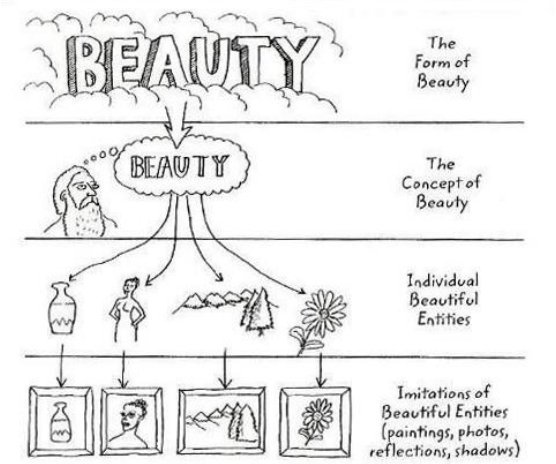
The question then arises: did Plato think of the Ideas as being "more real" than sensible things? Do true intellectual forms have more existence than ever-changing sensible realities? The debate on this point is open-ended, and depends in part on one's idea of Plato. He would certainly not have said that the sensible is not real, but, depending on how we interpret his writings, he would possibly have said that the sensible place is less real than the intellectual one —and for that same reason, that it is potentially 'bad' as well, the worse the further away it is from the truth of the Ideas. Plato's attitude towards the intellectual place, positing that it is from there that everything else originates, makes of his philosophy an **idealism**.[43]

Let us take an example. The Idea of table is the true understanding not only of one table, but of all the possible tables. The Idea of table is **universal**, and is the essence of all **particular** tables.[44] Therefore, a particular table will always be better if it is closer (more conform) to the Idea of table; that is, if the person who has crafted that particular table

[42] It is often talked about as the question of the two "worlds", but such a translation makes the two 'places' appear totally separate, while Plato could have used such word as a metaphor.
[43] It should not be mixed up with the common notion of idealist, "one whose conduct or thinking is influenced by ideals that often conflict with practical considerations." In philosophy, idealism means "to take Ideas (or any abstract or intellectual entities) as the starting point of reality."
[44] The expressions "universal" and "particular" are neither Platonician nor Greek, but come from the early medieval period in Western Europe, where intense debates took place – in Latin – around the Platonician/Aristotelian legacies.

had “their eye fixed” on the Idea of table. Therefore, to get to know the Idea of table is the path for building a good table, just as to know the Idea of justice is the path to excellence in political matters. But this also implies that a particular table, or a particular political action, will never be as good as the Idea of table or the Idea of justice. There is always a loss in the process, depending on how far things are from their essence.

To exemplify this, let us take the example of a **painter** who would decide to paint something beautiful.



He cannot paint the Idea of beauty, because an Idea cannot be shown, it can only be understood; it cannot be seen with the sense of sight, but only with the eye of the soul.

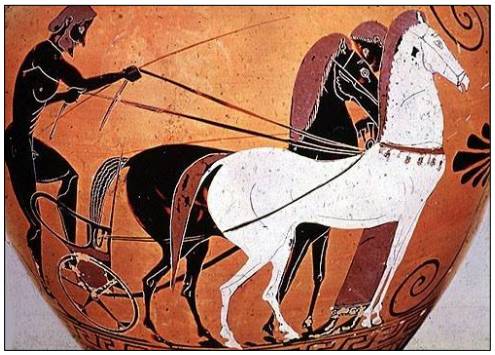
So what he would paint is an image of something beautiful. A particular beautiful entity presents itself to his eyesight, and the painter would re-present it; therefore his painting will be even less true (in the intellectual sense) than the entity it represents. It is two degrees away from the intellectual understanding of what is beautiful, because it accesses to it only through the sight of a re-presentation. We can figure out here that this doesn’t make of the painting something “less real”, but only something in which the Idea of beauty is less understandable. Yet if it is a ‘good’ painting, it could also have the power to get us closer to the Idea, by helping us remember what the Idea of beauty is, by showing us the path leading to intellectual understanding.

With regard to the two “places”, it's important to note that an understanding has emerged over the centuries that makes them two distinct “worlds” (the intelligible world and the sensible world), which doesn't seem to be the case with Plato. This understanding, influenced in particular by a Christian reading (and later by its rejection), came to dominate Plato's teaching in schools and universities; for this reason, it can be described as *dogmatic* — in other words, it is held to be true without supporting evidence. This interpretation is also convenient if we wish to reject Plato and with him all his philosophy: by making him a dualist philosopher (= separating mind and matter), it becomes easy to place him on the side of religion and dogmatism (= believing without proof). Yet, as we have shown throughout this chapter, such an interpretation is inconsistent with many elements of his thought. Such an interpretation of a dogmatic Plato appears to be itself dogmatic.

The Chariot Allegory

To conclude, let us mention another myth used by Plato to speak about the relationship between the **human soul** and the Ideas. The soul is likened to an Idea: it is the essence of a human being. The soul is eternal: it exists before its embodiment, and exists after the

death of the body. When a soul is associated with a body, it is more difficult for it to 'see' the Ideas, because the bodily senses disturb its capacity to 'see.' Conversely, when the soul is more independent of the body, it can then better "see" the Ideas. During their lifetime, philosophers strive to understand what a soul is, what their soul is, and the constraints it finds itself in, in order to foster this independence and gain clarity.



A chariot with two horses depicted on an amphora, Exekias, Greece, 530 BCE.

But since, before being associated with a body, all souls have been independent from the body, then the souls were all able to 'see' the Ideas at one point. Therefore, what we do when understanding the Ideas, is actually more of a recollection than a discovery. Indeed, if the Ideas are deathless, it would be impossible for us to "discover" or "invent" them, because they already exist. We could only "uncover" them. This is what Plato calls ἀνάμνησις (*anamnesis*): the action of remembering the truths we saw while our souls were not yet embodied (and when they will be no longer).

This also echoes with the Greek word for *truth*: ἀλήθεια [*aletheia*], composed from ἀ- (alpha privative) and λήθη [*lethe*] which means 'oblivion', 'concealment.' To know the truth therefore would mean to get it out of oblivion, i.e. to remember it.

The **Chariot Allegory** in Plato's *Phaedrus* (246a–254e) tells in a mythical form of what happens to the soul before it is embodied and after the death of the body.

The soul is figured by a winged chariot, pulled by a white horse (*spirit*) and a black horse (*appetite*) and driven by a charioteer (*reason*), who must manage the two horses in order to ascend through the sky, following the gods on the path of enlightenment. At the top of the sky is the place of Ideas (represented as a vast celestial plain), and the charioteers must maintain course in order not to lose the vision of the truth; but the black horse is pulling downwards, because *appetites* are only interested in what lies in the sensible place, to get satisfied) and many souls will eventually fall down to earth and never reach the summit.

Depending on how much of the plain of truths the soul has been able to see during its celestial procession, it will reincarnate in a different human condition. In order of decreasing levels of truth seen: (1) philosophers, lovers of beauty, men of culture, men who are dedicated to love; (2) law-abiding kings, military commanders or civic leaders; (3) politicians, estate-managers or businessmen; (4) athletes or doctors; (5) prophets or mystery cult initiators; (6) poets or imitative artists; (7) craftsmen or farmers; (8) sophists or demagogues; and (9) tyrants.

Though this distribution might appear static, it is not. Plato thought that any soul could, over the course of their lifetime, experience a change in attitude, open the eye of their soul and turn it towards true understanding.

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato wrote about love as capable of creating an inner dynamic to this whole system: when one experiences love for another person, the wings of their soul would begin to grow, allowing them to think not only in terms of self-interest, but towards the good of the person they love. From this starting point, the soul can begin to rise higher, and will be able to understand what is good for all human beings, universally. This is where the myth touches on the theory of Ideas, as found in *The Republic* or *The Symposium*.

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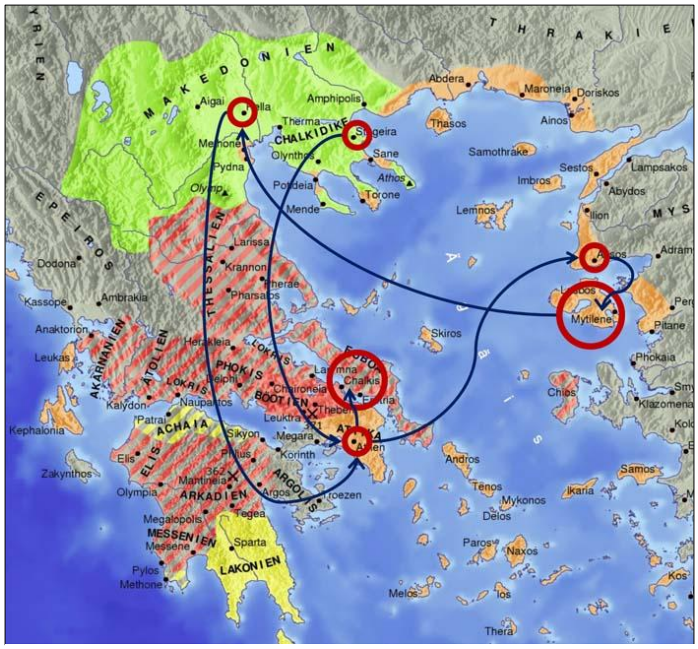
CHAPTER 7

ARISTOTLE

A Curious Mind

Aristotle (384-322 BCE) was born in the city of Stagira, in the region of Chalcidice in north-eastern Greece. His father Nicomachus was a physicist whose patients included Amyntas, the king of Macedonia. At the age of 17, Aristotle went to Athens to study under Plato, and remained at the Academy for nearly twenty years.

Considered by Plato to be his best student, he would soon begin to teach in the Academy. He was also interested in local political life, but since he was a metic (= a foreign resident of Athens, who did not have citizen rights) he could not participate. When Plato died in 348 BCE, it was his nephew Speusippus who succeeded him, which probably precipitated Aristotle's departure from the city.



The places where Aristotle lived are circled in red. Source: http://www.marshallfarrier.com/aristotle/map.htm, 15.02.2024.

Aged 36, he went to live first in Assos, then in Mytilene, on the island of Lesbos, and in both places he opened a philosophical school, inspired by the model of the Academy. There, he continued and deepened his research into biology and zoology: he would later write the first known books in biology, thus founding this new science. Through his observations of living animals, especially marine wildlife, and through carrying out dissections, he named five major biological processes: metabolism, temperature regulation, information processing, embryogenesis and inheritance.

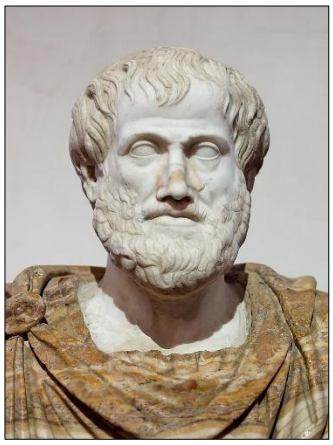
A few years later, in 343, King Philip II of Macedonia offered to employ him to tutor his son, who would later be known as **Alexander the Great**. In exchange for his teachings, Philip promised to rebuild Aristotle's birth city, Stagira, which he had razed during one of his military campaigns, and to free ex-citizens that had been taken for slaves, in order to repopulate it. Philip also provided a temple that would become the grounds of a boarding school for Alexander and other Macedonian nobles' sons. Among them was also Ptolemy,

who would later become the ruler of Egypt (when taking the succession of Alexander at his death) and the founder of the Great Library of Alexandria. Aristotle taught them philosophy, politics, medicine, logic, religion and art, until Alexander, aged 16, was named Regent of Macedonia, while his father waged war on neighbouring areas.

In 341, Aristotle married Pythias of Assos, also a biologist. Little is known about her, except that they collaborated on their researches and had a daughter together.

When Philip was assassinated in 336, Alexander took over the throne. One of his first actions as the new king was to invade Greece. Following him, Aristotle and his family returned to Athens in 335. Now aged 49, he wanted to open a school there, but since he was a metic he couldn't own property, so he and his students used **the Lyceum** as a teaching ground. The Lyceum was a gymnasium[45] located next to a temple dedicated to Apollo Lyceus ("Apollo of the light"), where several other philosophers had taught before him, including Socrates, Plato and Protagoras. There, it is said that Aristotle used to walk under the covered walkway, which gave its name to his school: the peripatetic school, from an Ancient Greek περιπατητικός (*peripatētikós*) meaning "walking around."

Meanwhile, Alexander had launched into his invasion of Persia. It is relevant to note that Aristotle had encouraged him to do so, using an ethnocentric rhetoric: he is reported to have advised Alexander to be "a leader to the Greeks and a despot to the barbarians, to look after the former as after friends and relatives, and to deal with the latter as with beasts or plants."[46] This proto-racism of the Ancient Greeks is also illustrated by the word **barbarian**, which was the name given to any foreigner who didn't speak Greek, other languages thus being reduced to an incomprehensible sound: 'bar-bar'.



Bust of Aristotle. Marble, Roman copy after a Greek bronze original made by Lysippos in 330

Aristotle shared the Greek *doxa* in that respect, which was also the case considering his views on children with disabilities – whom he thought should be abandoned[47] – and of women, whom he thought were to be subjected to men. We remember how Plato proposed for women to be educated alongside men with the view of becoming guardians; yet that didn't stop Plato as well from thinking that women were weaker in terms of intellectual capacity. Plato wrote (in the *Timaeus*) that a soul who did not do well would reincarnate as a woman, which posits the inferiority of the woman soul; whereas Aristotle, who did not believe in *metempsychosis* (= reincarnation), saw the difference as biological. Still, what we know

[45] A training facility for athletics and intellectual pursuit alike, that only men were allowed to use. The name derives from the Greek *gymnos*, "naked", since the athletes competed nude, to encourage aesthetic appreciation of the male body and honour the gods.
[46] Peter Green, *Alexander of Macedon*, University of California Press, 1991, p. 58.
[47] In *Politics*, VII, 1335 b: "As to the exposure and rearing of children born, let there be a law forbidding the rearing of any deformed child." This was a common practice in Athens and Sparta.

of Aristotle's first marriage may nuance this, alongside his statement that no society could be happy unless women were happy too.[48]

His wife Pythias died in Athens in 326, assassinated by opponents of Alexander, and Aristotle was devastated by this loss. He never remarried, but shared his life with a woman from Stagira, named Herpyllis, with whom he had a son, Nicomachus. His son's name will remain famous thanks to the title of one of his books: the *Nichomachean Ethics*, based on notes from his lectures at the Lyceum.

Aristotle worked there for twelve more years – composing his major works, including *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, *Politics*, *On the Soul, On Rhetoric* and *Poetics* – until Alexander's death in 323. The latter, throughout his conquests, sent many animal and plant specimens to his former teacher, allowing him to develop a zoo and botanical garden for his research. Alexander is also believed to have contributed important funding to the peripatetic school. While this manna ensured the survival of the school, it is worth noting that the Lyceum was managed by the students themselves, and that the whole institution was thought of as a collaborative canvas, where research would be done collectively. Even if Aristotle distanced himself from Plato's theories, he remained faithful to his teacher's spirit: to philosophize is to be a lover of wisdom, a quest that begins with a feeling of wonder, a complex emotion involving surprise, curiosity and joy.

With Alexander's death however, many Athenians began to harbour a strongly anti-Macedonian attitude, and because of his strong ties to him, Aristotle's life was threatened. In addition, a formal charge of impiety was brought against him by a priest, similarly to what had happened to Socrates. Aristotle escaped to Chalcis, where he would die of natural causes in the following year, at the age of 62.

His school would survive him, until 47 BCE, a century into the Roman invasion of Greece. But when the Roman general Sulla devastated Athens in 88 BCE, an important part of the Lyceum's library was stolen and reportedly shipped to Rome, where its trace was lost. Working with the remnants of the library, it was Andronicus of Rhodes – the eleventh and last leader of the school – who gathered, arranged and edited the works of Aristotle, until his death in 20 BCE. Aristotle's books were then translated and widely distributed, ensuring an immense impact on both sides of the Mediterranean sea, from Islamic philosophy to medieval Christian scholastics.

[48] "In the case of female children, excellence of body means beauty and stature, [excellence] of mind [means] temperance and industry, without servility. Equally in private life and in the community, both among men and among women, there is need to seek the existence of these qualities. Among those like the Lacedaimonians where the condition of women is poor happiness is only half present." in Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, Book I, Chapter 5, § 6.

Zoon Politikon

In a famous passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the philosopher wrote that "a human being is by nature a political animal."[49] In Ancient Greek ζῷον πολιτικόν (*zoon politikon*), the meaning of this expression needs to be nuanced.

What Aristotle understood by 'political' and what we understand differs. For us, politics is the sphere of lawmakers and statesmen, whereas Aristotle had a much broader definition of the term, understanding politics as **living together within an organized set of relationships** (on the model of a city = *polis*). In that sense, one could say that everything humans do is political, that *being political* is actually part of human nature.

In his *Politics* (I,2), Aristotle said that since "earlier forms of organizations [family, villages, etc.] are natural, so is the State." Bees or other gregarious animals are also political, one could argue, since they are organized. But "the human being is more of a political animal" says Aristotle, because its degree of organization is superior, thanks to the human ability to speak (*logos*):

> For nature, as we declare, does nothing without purpose; and man alone of the animals possesses speech. The mere voice, it is true, can indicate pain and pleasure, and therefore is possessed by the other animals as well (for their nature has been developed so far as to have sensations of what is painful and pleasant and to indicate those sensations to one another), but speech is designed to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also the right and the wrong; for it is the special property of man in distinction from the other animals that he alone has perception of good and bad and right and wrong and the other moral qualities, and it is partnership in these things that makes a household and a city-state.[50]

Aristotle thought that speech is at the root of the human development of intelligence. Through the active use of their language, humans are able to enhance their forms of organization, to project themselves into the future ("the advantageous and the harmful") and to judge their actions from a moral point of view ("the right and the wrong"). Still, for Aristotle, humans *are* animals, fitted with a special capacity but an animal nonetheless.

A chimpanze colony in Liberia. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images.

Unlike Plato who invited us to believe that the human soul is immortal, Aristotle posited that the soul is a complex system of abilities, made of three potentials that are articulated to the different organs of the body. As we will see, two of them the humans share with other

[49] Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1097b, trans. by R. Crisp, 2000.
[50] Translation by H. Rackham, 1944. The word "man" refers to the Greek *anthropos* ≡ "human being".

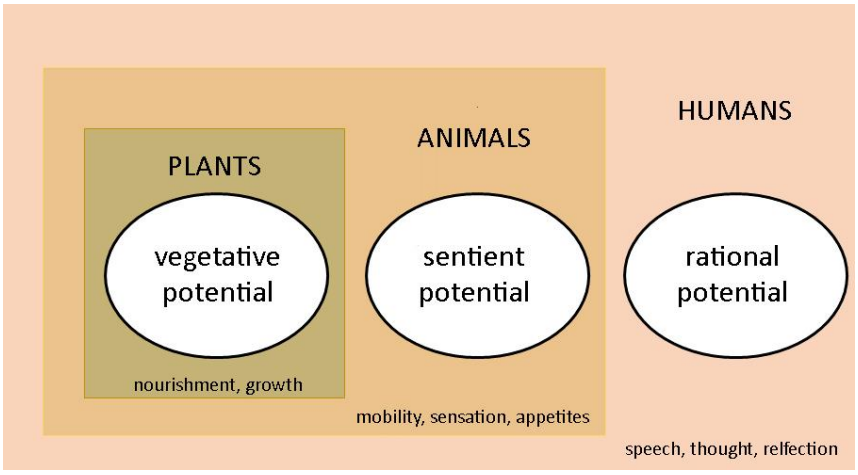
animals, and only one of them is specific to human beings: the capacity to speak and think rationally.

This was the vision of a biologist. Where Plato was an idealist, Aristotle was more of an **empiricist**. Where Plato believed in immortal Ideas, Aristotle thought that knowledge could only be attained through reasoning upon sensory experience.

The Three Human Capacities

Aristotle's analyses could be described as biopsychology: a study of the soul within a biological framework. It appears in a number of works, notably in his systematic treatise on the nature of the soul[51] and in the *Nichomachean Ethics*.

Aristotle distinguished between three 'parts' of the soul. Each of them is in fact known only through its action in the human body. Therefore, we may speak of these three elements as capacities. And since they are not active at all times to the same level, it is correct also to speak of three potentials, which actualisation can vary.



Humans share with other living beings essential characteristics. In common with plants and other animals, they possess first of all a **vegetative and nutritive potential**, which ensures their "life of nourishment and growth." It is the capacity to breath, to feed and to grow, active at all times, day and night: "this part and its capacity are thought more than others to be active during sleep" (*N.E.* 1102b).

Secondly, in common not with plants but with the other animals, human beings possess a **sentient potential**. This is the life of the senses (Greek: *aesthesis*) which develops "in appetite and desire." This potential is divided by Aristotle in two parts: one without reason (similar to Plato's appetitive part) and one which is obedient to reason (similar to Plato's spirited part). Although it is shared with other animals, it is just as essential to humans,

[51] Περὶ Ψυχῆς, *Peri Psuchēs*, meaning 'On the Soul,' best known by its Latin title: *De Anima*.

since all the information that will matter in order to make rational and moral choices come to us through our sensory experience.

The third element humans and only humans possess is the **rational potential**. 'Reason' is the only one of the three capacities that is "concerned with practical life," i.e. a life of choices. It is the capacity to speak and think (*logismos kai dianoia*). Aristotle also distinguished two parts in reason: one that is passive (the ability to listen to someone else's ideas or advice), the other active (the ability to reason and reflect on oneself). The latter is, according to Aristotle, the one humans are to exercise especially, "engaging in thought" in order to accomplish their nature completely.

If the body dies, then there is nothing anymore to support the three capacities. We may first lose our capacity to speak and think, and possibly our capacity to feel, but when our vegetative and nutritive potential dies, the soul dies.

Happiness ≈ Eudaïmonia

It was within this canvas that Aristotle reflected upon the best way to lead a human life. He therefore treated the question of excellence (*aretḗ*) differently than Plato, although the first lines of the *Nichomachean Ethics* look quite platonician:

> Every skill and every inquiry, and similarly every action and rational choice, is thought to aim at some good; and so the good has been aptly described as that at which everything aims. But it is clear that there is some difference between ends […]

Aristotle did not admit that exists a unique Idea of good, judging Plato's view to be too abstract. Instead, he noticed that "the good appears to vary between different actions and skills" and asked: "What then is the good in each case?" (*N.E.* 1097a)

He solved this question by introducing the concept of **end** (Greek: τέλος, *télos*). The end – of an action or a being – is its aim, its finality, its purpose. What this action is done for, what this being is made for? For example, what is the *télos* of a shoemaker? Answer: to make shoes. This end, inherent to his mastering the skill of making shoes, is then the organizational starting-point (or principle) of his life as a shoemaker.

So the end is not only to attain one's goal, but is potential (Greek: *dynamis*) at every stage of the shoemaker's activity.[52] Aristotle speaks differently of, on one hand, all the **activities** (Greek: *energeia*) that participate in making a pair of shoes, and on the other hand the **production** of shoes considered as a whole process (Greek: *ergon*).

[52] An additional hint at that dynamic can be found in this famous quote from Goethe: "It is not enough to take steps which may someday lead to a goal; each step must be itself a goal and a step likewise."

Let us now come back to our first question: what is a good human life, and so: what is our end, and, throughout our everyday life, our *ergon*, our endeavour?[53]

To reach a conclusion, we need to know not only what a particular good human life is, but what is common to all good human lives. Is there a good that is common to all human lives, the pursuit of which could be deemed to be the **chief end**?

In the first demonstration of the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle draws a parallel with our skills (Greek: *techné*), that he differentiates between subordinate skills and master skill (Greek: *architekton*, meaning the skill that is at the starting point [≡ arché] of the others[54]). If the shoemaker makes shoes, it is for humans to be able to walk, and if he/she makes good shoes then his/her customers will walk well; but walking isn't the finality of a human life. Indeed, if we look at things this way, a lot of subordinate skills exist, since we need food, clothing, tools, etc. But, Aristotle concludes, there is one skill that organizes them all: politics, the human skill (or art) of living well together.

To exert this art, we need to understand the human end, which must be something that is not only the good of one activity, but the **chief good** (Greek: *agiston*, "the best"). It is not pleasure, or wealth, or honour, because humans pursue these things not only for themselves, but because they think it will make them happier. The greater end, the chief good, Aristotle concludes, for human beings is **happiness** (Greek: *eudaïmonia*). It is something that humans don't pursue in order to get something else, but pursue for itself, as the endeavour of a lifetime. As an end, it is complete and self-sufficient, and all the other activities and goals are subordinated to it and subsumed by it.

How can we live in happiness? By developing the full potential of our nature. And since humans' endeavour (their *ergon*) is dependent on their capacity to reason – the one capacity that is specific to the human soul – we are to engage actively in its exercise.

It is for us the only way to get better and **achieve excellence in each of our actions**. For Aristotle, such a statement concerns the flute player as well as the politician, the student as well as the teacher, and so on. Their "good" are different, thus the concept of good is multiple, but they all join together in the chief end that is happiness.

Political skill and knowledge, therefore, must aim at the happiness of the community, both in general and in particular, within the limits it has itself fixed (1097b).

[53] Roger Crisp translates *ergon* as "product", but this English word fails to refer to the process as well as to the end, therefore we chose to translate it as "production." Concerning humans, Crisp translates *ergon* as "characteristic activity", but since this could be confusing, so we chose to translate it as "endeavour".

[54] From the Greek *architekton* is derived the English word "architect," the one who organizes the work of the different people active in the construction of a house: carpenter, electrician, etc.

The Power of Habituation

To understand politics, Aristotle says, one has to be **experienced** (*N.E.* 1095a). Young persons ("young" either in age or in character) are not fit for its study, since they lack the experience of the "actions of life" and tend to follow their passions (*pathos*) rather than their reason (*logos*). Here again, Aristotle turns out to be an empiricist, valuing concrete experience over abstract knowledge (cf. his critique of Plato).

Moreover, he points out that "knowledge of […] political science will prove very beneficial to those who follow reason both in shaping their desires and in acting" (*N.E.* 1095a). This act of shaping is at the core of ethical life. Indeed, there is a strong relationship between our behaviours and our ***ethos***, i.e. our attitude in life:

> Presumably we have to begin from things known by us. This is why anyone who is going to be a competent student in the spheres of what is noble and what is just – in a word, politics – must be brought up well in his habits [= *ethos*].

Like in Plato, a good upbringing is one that allows a child to differentiate between what is and what is not.[55] And since politics is a matter of action, the "habit" that Aristotle describes will further consist in differentiating between 'what should be done' and 'what should not be done.' From this perspective, **forming habits means shaping our being**. From birth to adolescence and then adulthood, we would need to form habits that are appropriate to what we want to become, each of which is part of our overall endeavour.

Thus, making an ethical choice – choosing an attitude and a course of action – is linked **1)** to our habit of making such choices and differentiating between options (*choosing* is like a muscle that is exercised), and **2)** to our awareness of the development of our potential.

Habituation is also a powerful political tool: a new law soon becomes a habit, a habit transforms into a custom, in such a way that people behave after some time as if it was second nature. Each generation is born into a new political environment, imitating and adapting to such a set of conventions. Aristotle's goal is to show us how we should engage our reason in thinking what the best shapes are for our desires, in order to achieve the greater end: the happiness of the human community.

The Golden Mean

To help us lead a happy life, Aristotle proposes a method for evaluating our attitudes. Rather than judging actions themselves, he invites us to question our inner movements to

[55] This view of education looks a lot like Plato's description of dogs as capable of making the difference between people they know and people they don't know, a capacity that he called a "philosopher's nature." Cf. *The Republic*, 376a.

test the motives behind our actions. This mode of reasoning could therefore be described as psychological.

His method consists of examining each of our attitudes and asking ourselves: is it a deficiency, an excess, or somewhere in between? If our attitude at the moment of action is either a deficiency or an excess, then it is potentially harmful. Conversely, attitudes that lie between these extremes are beneficial, and these are the ones we should cultivate. They are the "middle path" or the "golden mean" between the extremes.

Deficiency (-)	GOLDEN MEAN	Excess (+)
cowardice	courage	recklessness
insensibility	temperance	self-indulgence
undue humility	ambition	empty vanity
lack of spirit	patience	irascibility
shamelessness	modesty	shyness

Any attitude that strikes the right balance is called "ethical virtue" or "ethical excellence." It shows us the path to follow in order to fulfill our purpose as human beings: to contribute to the harmony of the community by developing our rational potential. Indeed, reason is the only capacity that allows us to understand ourselves psychologically, that is, to reflect on our attitudes and desires.

Mimesis & Catharsis

Like Plato, Aristotle observed that humans learn through **imitation** (*mimesis*)—and get many of their habits this way. They mimic their parents', friends' and teachers' attitude and behaviours; and when one wants to learn a new skill, the first steps consist in observing and replicating the actions of a master. The master's task is thus to oversee the imitation process, and differentiate the right from the wrong imitation.

Imitation holds an important place in the arts, especially in poetry and theatre. Aristotle thinks – again like Plato – that the purpose of *mimesis* is to reveal what is common to all human beings, common character traits or behaviours. For Aristotle, however, such notions should always be tied to particular concrete situations.

His study of **tragedy** states that its end is to allow κάθαρσις (*kátharsis*), i.e. the purging of emotions, in particular the ones that he deems negative: fear and pity. In that regard, it is worth noticing that in Ancient Greece theatres where located nearby temples. The most famous of them could be found in Epidaurus, a renowned healing sanctuary which was believed to be the birthplace of Asclepius, the god of medicine. One of the functions of ancient theatre could therefore be seen as a form of therapy for social emotions.

In order to purge negative emotions, Aristotle thought that a theatrical play must achieve a high degree of resemblance with the real, so that onlookers can 1) believe in it,

2) empathize with the emotions of the characters, and 3) identify their own experience with the actions shown. For Aristotle, emotions, located in the body, can be drawn out of the body by being expressed, like a doctor would extract a poison.

The theatre at Epidaurus, built in the 4th BCE and still in use today.

Concerning the action of *mimesis* in general and the possibility of using it within a moral framework in particular, let us read a few lines from John Baxter's article in the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory* (1993):

> The activity of mimesis can be seen as moral in two very broad senses. First, the act of attending to reality implies that it is worth attending to and worth respecting as different from, though not necessarily unrelated to, the perceiver. Second, the enactments of literature explore the implications or consequences of human actions and perception. At its best, mimesis is a method of strengthening and deepening the moral understanding, just as it is also a method of exploring and challenging received notions of the real. The process does not rest simply with what any reader or writer happens to know; it may stretch the limits of the real by entertaining the conceivable as at least provisionally real, or as offering a perspective on aspects of the real that cannot otherwise be seen. Reality is sometimes defined in contradistinction to the imaginary. But that Aristotle has a more comprehensive view of reality than this distinction allows is shown by his witty remark about a likely impossibility being superior to an implausible possibility. (One of the great examples of a likely impossibility is the ideal state in Plato's *Republic*.)[56]

Aristotle's Logical Ontology

Since human endeavour is to develop our rational potential, there is a need for an instrument to use it efficiently. This instrument is **logic**: an ensemble of formal rules for correct reasoning that can be applied to any field of knowledge. Aristotle's logic was widely

[56] John Baxter, « Mimesis », in Irena Makaryk (general editor), *Encyclopedia of contemporary literary theory*, University of Toronto Press, 1993, p. 592.

used by philosophers in the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe until the 19th century, and it permeates everyday language.

Aristotle's logic is designed to describe what exists in the world. He elaborates on ten different ways to produce meaning: the **categories** (Greek: *kategoria,* "signification"). They include 1) substance, 2) quantity, 3) quality, 4) relation, 5) where, 6) when, 7) being-in-a-position, 8) possessing, 9) doing, and 10) being affected by something.

For example, we could say about a small white horse eating grass in a meadow in summer, that 1) it is a horse, 2) one horse, 3) a white horse, 4) almost as small as a pony, 5) in a meadow, 6) at 2pm, 7) standing, 8) with a ribbon in its mane, 9) eating grass, and 10) suffering from the heat. This allows of course for innumerable variations.

The first category, that of **substance** (*ousia*), is quite remarkable. The world, according to Aristotle, is composed of substances, which are of two kinds:

- A primary substance is an individual being, composed of matter and characterized by a form: this child, this tree, this horse, etc.
- Secondary substances are larger groups (*species* and *genus*) to which each of the individual beings belong: for example *this* child is a human (*species*) and an animal (*genus*).

The purpose of logic is then to ascribe properties to substances. Depending on whether they are relative to the primary or the secondary substance, they are said to be:

- Accidental, when the properties may or may not belong to the subject, without affecting its essence. E.g. *Antonio has long black hair*.
- Essential, when the properties are inherent to the secondary substance an individual belongs to. E.g. *Human beings have hair*.

Aristotle's theory proves to be very different from Plato's theory of Ideas, because Aristotle, taking as a starting point the things known to us through sensory experience, always tries to understand the properties (essential and accidental) of *particular* instances, rather than the universals for themselves as Plato did.

Aristotle conceives specific beings (*ousia*) as a compound of matter and form. **Matter**, in Ancient Greek ὕλη (*húlē*) is a relative term: a table is made of wood, a syllable is made of letters, a sentence is made of words, etc. This conception is useful for the purpose of studying the modifications of particular beings, each of whom are made of matter and form. The **form**, in Ancient Greek μορφή (*morphē,* also translated into 'shape'), can change to some extent, depending on whether it is accidental or essential.[57]

Let us take an example from Aristotle's *Physics*: "the art of statue-making and the bronze are both causes of a statue, […] but the latter is a cause as matter, and the former as that from which the change proceeds." (195a)

[57] In the 19th century CE, this theory was termed hylomorphism.

For Aristotle, the form acts as a cause (what he calls the *formal cause*)[58] and defines the specific being (*ousia*) of a thing. Thus, that which is composite is subsumed under the form. "Matter is apt to be shaped by form, and form is apt to impose structure on matter. It is in this mutual adaptation that the unity of the composite and of its definition consists."[59] As for humans, their *psyché* is their formal cause, their organizing principle.

Another set of important concepts invented by Aristotle consists in distinguishing between the potential and the actual:

- The English word potential translates the Greek δύναμις (*dunamis*), from which our word 'dynamic' is derived. 'Potential' indicates the aptitude to be modified in a certain form, e.g. there is potentially a statue in a bloc of bronze, it is not yet real but it is possible to realise it with the bronze. What is potential is not yet actual, not yet realised, but could be.
- The English word actual translates the conceptual couple ἔργον/ενέργεια (*ergon*/*energeia*), from which our word 'energy' is derived. 'Actual' indicates the coming-into-being of the form, e.g. the statue is made actual by the sculptor, by many actions (*energeia*) converging within a process (*ergon*).

'Essential,' 'accidental,' 'potential' and 'actual' are all terms we inherited from Latin translations and commentaries of Aristotle during the medieval period. They have been used to such an extent that they are now a part of our everyday language. In Aristotle's works, they are part of an effort at **systematic thinking**: each element is designed to be linked to the others, all are interdependent, and the whole is intended to be coherent.

The philosophy of Aristotle is the first historical attempt at such a degree of formalisation, and it mirrors his intention: to make his definitions identical to the specific being of things (*ousia* in Greek, *essentia* in Latin). Our endeavour as humans is to express **the true meaning** of the existence of things and of their relations.

Indeed, one rule presides ethically over all ascriptions of meaning: that they must be true. In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle writes a definition thereof that seems inspired by Parmenides: "to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true"; and "to say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false" (1011b). Aristotle deduced two laws from this: the law of identity and the law of non-contradiction.

Obviously, the statement "water is wet" is only true if water *is* wet. But the law of identity allows for something more: if we consider that 'wet' is an essential quality of "water," we can conclude that everything that is watery is wet.

Aristotle's second law is the law of non-contradiction, which states that no proposition can be both true and false. The purpose of any proposition is to describe reality; Aristotle's

[58] Aristotle distinguished between four different kinds of causes. Let us consider them very briefly, using the example of the table. A table has 1) a *material cause*, the wood it is made of; 2) a *formal cause*, its design; 3) an *efficient cause*, the human being who made it; and 4) a *final cause*, its purpose. The formal cause is the only one to be identified with the essence (*ousia*).
[59] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. by H. Lawson-Tancred, Penguin, 1998, p. 248.

logic therefore excludes defining something as both "X" and "not X." This law runs counter to Protagoras' relativism, as well as Parmenides' immutability: for Aristotle, as an empiricist, things are not always what they are, but, because life is a generative force, they change and undergo modifications. Thanks to his categories and his theory of causes, Aristotle was able to combine the essentiality and accidentality of substance.

A Method of Deduction

Thanks to the logical framework of the categories, Aristotle opened a new path for the formation of knowledge. Things could be studied and then organised, according to complex and hierarchized definitions. To do so, Aristotle used deduction, a technique that had been used before him but never formalised. It is an analysis of how language functions, and results in a method to produce 'true' meaning.

A first step is to create a **categorical proposition**. It is composed of at least three terms: a subject (a word naming a substance, e.g. 'this horse'), a copula (a connecting verb, e.g. 'is') and a predicate (a word naming a universal property, e.g. 'an animal').

A second step is to add **determinations**, using "all" (universal), "some" (particular) and "no" (negation), in order to express quantity, and "is" or "is not" to express quality.

A third step is to combine propositions together to enable deduction. The Greek word for 'deduction' is συλλογισμός (*sullogismós*, composed of *sun*, 'together,' and *logos*, 'speech'). We call today 'syllogistic' the deductive method formalised by Aristotle.

> A deduction is speech [*logos*] in which, certain things having been supposed, something different from those supposed results of necessity because of their being so.[60]

A syllogism is an argument made up of at least three categorical propositions, including two premises (which set out the evidence), and a conclusion (that necessarily follows from the premises). A proverbial example is: "**All humans are mortal, Socrates is human, therefore Socrates is mortal.**" A syllogism can be true or false, depending on the truth of the premises and of the logical links, which must therefore be checked. Then, if a syllogism is valid all the way through, it qualifies as a demonstration.

Aristotle's logic allows us to work with universal notions by deduction, in the same way that, in geometry, we can deduce from 1) the universal law stating that all the angles within a triangle add up to 180°, and 2) the knowledge of the value of two angles, 3) the value of the third one. This use of demonstrations is at the basis of **scientific knowledge**.

The word 'science' is derived from the Latin *scientia* (≈ knowledge), which translates the Greek word *epistêmê* (cf. Lesson 2). Scientific knowledge is a kind of knowledge for

[60] Aristotle, *Prior Analytics*, 24b18–20.

which we must know “the cause why the thing is, that it is the cause of this, and that this cannot be otherwise.” This is the whole purpose of syllogisms and demonstrations.

*

Aristotle applied this method to many fields, writing treatises in the fields of physics, astronomy, geology, biology, zoology, psychology, and also on practical philosophy, in the fields of politics, economy and ethics.

However, he believed that the syllogistic method was not always the best approach, and recommended the use of rhetoric or dialectic depending on the circumstances and the goal pursued. Dialectic is very versatile and can be used in many fields, while rhetoric is particularly useful for practical issues and public debates; dialectic deals with general issues, while rhetoric applies mainly to specific topics; dialectic is more useful for testing the consistency of a set of arguments, while rhetoric aims to persuade a given audience. Which tool should we choose then?

For Aristotle, such a choice depends on the end we are aiming for. A shoemaker, a poet, an army commander, a nurse, a teacher, or a banker each act for their own *telos*, and at the same time, because they are all human, they share with everyone else the *telos* specific to their species. This is how they can understand each other.

*

CHAPTER 8

René Descartes

A European Thinker

René Descartes (1596-1650 CE) was born in La Haye, a town in central-eastern France, the third child in a catholic family belonging to the lesser nobility. His mother died when he was 13 months old – after giving birth to another son, who would die soon after – and he was raised by his father and his grandparents. Since he was deemed of fragile constitution, they cared for him a lot. Descartes' father was a member of the Parliament of Brittany, who ensured the education of his son. When he was 11 years old, he was sent to a boarding school directed by the Jesuits, the *Collège royal Henri-le-Grand* in La Flèche.

Seven years later, in 1614, now educated in physics, mathematics and scholastic philosophy (= the main type of philosophy that was taught throughout the Middle-Ages and Renaissance, mixing the influences of Aristotle and Christianity), he entered the University of Poitiers. There, he obtained a license in Law; it was the wish of his father that he followed in his steps, but the real interests of Descartes would prove different.

Aged 22, after having spent some time in Paris, he joined the Protestant Dutch State Army in 1618, a way for him to undertake a formal study of military engineering, which implied teachings in physics and mathematics. The same year, he met the physician and mathematician Isaac Beeckman, with whom he would have an important correspondence over the years. Descartes' fate within the field of sciences hadn't revealed itself yet, but he used his time of leisure to practice mathematics with real passion.

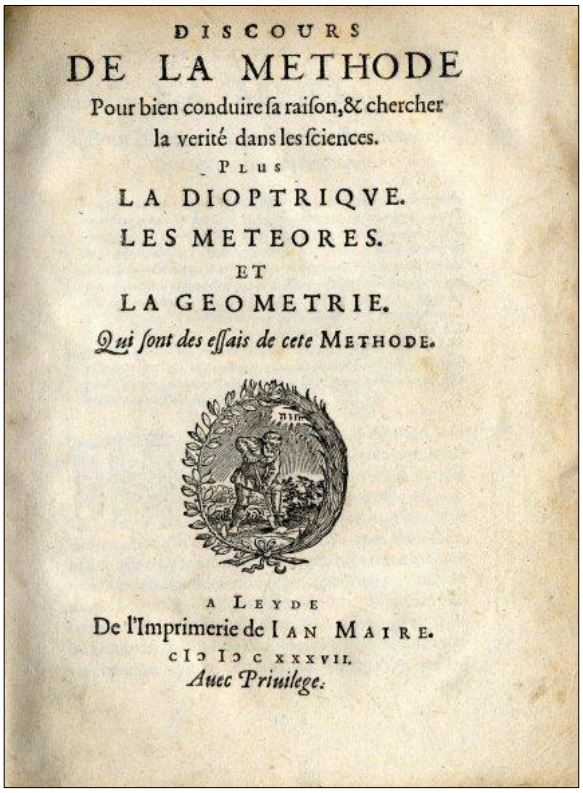
In 1619, he travelled to Denmark, then Germany, where he witnessed the coronation of Emperor Ferdinand II. The next year began the Thirty Years' War, a long period of armed conflicts, tied to the religious struggles between Catholics and Protestants, during which more than 8 million people died (from the war itself but also from its consequences: plague, famine, etc.) and which would shatter the Holy Roman Empire. Descartes, a mercenary in the Dutch Army, participated in the Battle of the White Mountain near Prague. But he wouldn't stay a soldier very long.

Portrait of René Descartes by Frans Hals (1649).

In November 1619, during the war's winter break, he made over the course of one night three consecutive dreams that would change his life. Descartes talked about it as one would talk of a divine revelation. From that moment, he would put all his enthusiasm to the task: his goal will be to produce a **new foundation for the sciences**, bringing mathematical reasoning into philosophy. As we shall see, he thus distanced himself from the theology and religion that dominated philosophy at the time.

He left the army, sold everything that he inherited from his mother and was able to live on this income, travelling through Europe over the course of the following years, from Germany to Italy and from France to the Netherlands. He never stayed for a long time in the same place, by fear of being disturbed or distracted from his task. In the recesses of his solitary life, he was to meet with several important scientists of the times, with whom he talked and exchanged letters concerning his research, among which important discoveries in geometry, algebra, optics and anatomy.

In 1633, after more than ten years of complete immersion into his work, Descartes was ready to publish his first major book, entitled ***Traité du monde et de la lumière***. But he then learned that Galileo had just been condemned, by the Catholic Holy Office, for championing Copernicus' heliocentric thesis. At the time, Descartes would deem it cautious to delay the publication of his own defence of the same thesis.


DISCOURS
DE LA METHODE
Pour bien conduire sa raison, & chercher
la verité dans les sciences.
PLUS
LA DIOPTRIQVE.
LES METEORES.
ET
LA GEOMETRIE.
Qui sont des essais de cette METHODE.
A LEYDE
De l'Imprimerie de IAN MAIRE.
cIↃ IↃ c XXXVII.
Auec Priuilege.

Title page of the first edition of the *Discourse on the Method*.

He decided on another course of action and published some years later, in 1637, what was to become his most popular book: ***Discours de la méthode***, written in French. It was made out of fragments from his previous *Traité du monde*, but reworked within a narrative that tells of his thought process and preparations. The subtitle of the book says it well: *Pour bien conduire sa raison, et chercher la vérité dans les sciences*[61].

In those years of intense intellectual activity and writing, Descartes lived mainly in Stanpoort, in the Netherlands, and was in a relationship with a woman named Hélène Jans, his former maid. She gave birth to a girl in 1635, Francine, whom Descartes would

[61] In English: *A Discourse on the Method of Correctly Conducting One's Reason and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*. Cf. Ian Maclean's translation published by Oxford University Press, 2006.

recognise as his; but Francine died five years later, in 1640, from strong fevers. Only a month later, Descartes' father died; another hard blow.

The following year, he moved to live in the small castle of Endegeest, where he would attempt some experimentations in alchemy with a friend, while working on his second major work: *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia* (= Meditations on First Philosophy), in Latin. The book – which would be published in French in 1647 under the title ***Méditations métaphysiques*** – strengthens and expands the metaphysical arguments that Descartes already defended in his *Discourse on the Method*. The choice to write and publish in Latin this time could be seen as an attempt to obtain the acknowledgment of the intelligentsia. And indeed, Descartes would now have many enemies.

Aside from a controversy with the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, he was violently attacked by members of the catholic clergy, who accused him of defending Copernicus' heliocentrism, of thinking that the soul was merely an accident and, of course, of being an atheist. This particular polemic eventually died down, though many others would arise over the course of the 17th century, between other rationalist philosophers (Leibniz, Spinoza) and the religious powers of their time.

In his last years, Descartes continued to write letters to other scientists and philosophers, defending his positions, travelling to meet some of them (e.g. Pascal in France), and became interested in ethics, publishing his *Traité des passions* in 1649. Meanwhile, his books had travelled and convinced many people all around Europe. That same year, he was invited by Christina, Queen of Sweden, to become her tutor. He accepted and moved to Stockholm.

The circumstances of his death are obscure. The official version states that he contracted pneumonia in the beginning of February 1650 and died ten days later. Certainly Sweden's climate wasn't an easy one for the philosopher. But another theory says he was assassinated: a catholic priest would have given him a wafer poisoned with arsenic, afraid that Descartes would stop Christina from converting to Catholicism, given the philosopher's denial of several of the Roman Church's dogmas.

Another mystery surrounds his death. During the repatriation of his body to France by an emissary of Louis XIV, Descartes' skull was lost or stolen. This gave birth to many hypotheses surrounding the fate of this piece of bone, which had been one of the birthplaces of the scientific revolution…

Writing in French, saying "I", proving God

A Discourse on the Method is remarkable on several points. Firstly, it was **written in French**, while the common language at the time for philosophy, as well as for the sciences in general, was Latin. Descartes decided to do so in order to mark his opposition to scholastic philosophy and give a wider access to his book: a rebellion against the establishment of his times.

Indeed, Descartes is considered one of the chief architects of the 17th century intellectual revolution – known as **Rationalism** – which destabilized the doctrines of medieval and Renaissance scholasticism. In his opinion, scientific knowledge had little to do with the Latin-speaking elite, and all to do with sharing and advancing knowledge. He believed that anyone, given the right method to conduct their reason, was able to distinguish the truth and avoid errors in thinking:

> Le bon sens est la chose du monde la mieux partagée […] et ainsi que la diversité de nos opinions ne vient pas de ce que les uns sont plus raisonnables que les autres, mais seulement de ce que nous conduisons nos pensées par diverses voies, et ne considérons pas les mêmes choses. **Car ce n'est pas assez d'avoir l'esprit bon, le principal est de l'appliquer bien**.[62]

This goes hand in hand with the other remarkable stylistic novelty of *A Discourse on the Method*: it was **written from an assumed subjective perspective**. Descartes wrote what *he* thought, saying "I", and calling for his readers not to trust him but to doubt him, to be critical of what they read and take nothing for granted. After centuries of religious **dogmatism**, his way of speaking his subjectivity came as a liberation. And after centuries of **speculative thinking** (i.e. making theories without any physical proofs), it re-opened the doors to empiricism. If, as a philosophical current, Empiricism is often opposed to Rationalism (Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley and Hume *versus* Descartes, Leibniz and Spinoza), it is important to remember that Descartes championed **experience over dogma**, though it is the experience of reason over that of the senses.

Illustration by Joost Swarte for *The New Yorker*, 2006.

Why, then, would Descartes try to prove the existence of God? We have to keep in mind that, for a religious mind, the existence of God doesn't have to be proven; it is a matter of faith. To think that one could prove the existence God is **heresy**[63]. So it all comes down to what "God" we are actually talking about… Descartes was not interested in proving the existence of any religious God, but rather of the idea of God, one quite similar to Plato's. Descartes' idea was not a result of faith or speculation over the Biblical texts, but a product of the sheer application of logical, deductive thinking (in short, the reasoning we will develop further is as follows: "I am

[62] Incipit from *A Discourse on the Method*: "Good sense is the most evenly distributed thing in the world […] and that consequently the diversity of our opinions arises not from the fact that some of us are more reasonable than others, but solely that we have different ways of directing our thoughts, and do not take into account the same things. For it is not enough to possess a good mind; the most important thing is to apply it correctly."

[63] Descartes' books were forbidden to Catholic readers by the Roman Curia in 1663.

capable of thinking of something perfect, yet I am imperfect, so the idea of perfection cannot come from me, but necessarily from something that is truly perfect, that is, God; and since we cannot conceptualize perfection without existence, God exists").

Along with Descartes' switch to French and his assuming of a subjective perspective, his rationalist conception of God would prove over time a considerable blow to the Christian dogma. Can we say that it was the end of all dogmatism? One could easily argue that Descartes participated in creating a new kind of dogma, even a new religion, **the religion of Science**, based on the faith that "rational facts" do exist, and bringing to power a new social class, that of people who could afford higher education.

A Thought Experiment for Finding Truth in Sciences

In *A Discourse on the Method*, Descartes proceeds to demonstrate **a mental experiment**, which will consist of **doubting everything** — but before proceeding with the experiment itself, Descartes gives us the means to repeat it, by following his method and the different steps he has taken. That others could repeat it successfully would be proof that his conclusions were correct; while if they were not, others would be able to find where the misstep took place and correct it.

Descartes is often accused of **solipsism** (i.e. that his conclusions were only valid within his thought process), and there is certainly something to it; but we should also consider that his invitation for others to repeat his experiment reflects the emerging scientific habit (= *ethos*) of demanding that knowledge always be proven by valid repetitions of its conditions of possibility and throughout its whole acquisition process.

After an introduction on reason and science (*Part One*), Descartes begins by giving the conditions of the mental experiment: A) his method (*Part Two*) and B) his provisional moral code (*Part Three*).

A) The four precepts of the method:

It is a code of conduct for the mind. If we are to undertake this experiment, then we should follow it, in order to avoid bias and make it to the end.

1) "Never to accept anything as true" which we do not know to be 100% true. Something that is true with certainty must appear to us *clearly* and *distinctly*. It is an example of **inductive** thinking (going from the particular fact to the general conclusion), opposed to **deductive** thinking (from a general theory to the determination of particular facts).
2) "To divide all the difficulties" we will encounter into as many parts as possible.
3) "To begin with the simplest elements" and gradually ascend to the most complex.
4) "To undertake complete enumerations" and surveys, in order to leave nothing out.

B) The four maxims of the provisional moral code:

Soon, we are going to doubt absolutely everything, but the experiment might take some time, a time during which we will still need to eat and have a roof over our head (Descartes speaks about rebuilding the house of knowledge: while we destroy the walls of the old house, we will need a little house on the side in which to live). The provisional moral code is a code of social and self-conduct that we should follow as long as the experiment will last. It is composed of four maxims:

1) "To follow the laws and customs" of the country where we live (including its religion), in order not to have problems with society. Descartes advises us to keep a low profile, since we will need peace of mind and time ahead of us.
2) "To be firm and resolute in my actions", otherwise we would be lost.
3) "To endeavour always to master myself rather than fortune", since we are more likely to efficiently master ourselves than change the world around us.
4) "To choose the best occupation according to my goals", meaning that we have no time to lose. We should choose an activity that will allow us to take steps in the direction that we want to follow, in order to progress and be happy with it.

► We are now ready to begin with the experiment itself (Part Four). It will unfold through four main steps, each necessarily needing to follow the previous one.

1) The radical doubt:

The first step is "to reject as completely false everything in which I could detect the least doubt, in order to see if anything thereafter remained in my belief that was completely indubitable". Firstly, Descartes finds out that **our senses** deceive us sometimes; so he will doubt everything that comes from the senses. Secondly, **our reasoning** sometimes deceives us as well; so he will doubt every demonstration he had previously held to be true. Then, he considers the fact that what we are shown in **our dreams** is never real (dreams = illusions), and since sometimes we dream about things that we think are true while awake (for example I can dream about the operation 2+2 = 4), then there is a doubt concerning those things and, in fact, "everything that had ever entered my head".
Put in another way: can we prove that we are not dreaming right now?

2) The proof of the existence of subjectivity:

While doubting everything, Descartes finds out he cannot doubt the fact he is doubting; therefore he is thinking; and this proves that he exists, **as a thinking subjectivity**.
I think, therefore I am. Or in Latin: *Cogito, ergo sum*.

Je pense, donc je suis.

Descartes is certain about this (it appears to him clearly and distinctly) and decides to take it as the "first principle of the philosophy I was seeking".

3) The two substances (mind/matter dualism):

Descartes, with this principle in mind, proceeds to test it. If he were to stop thinking (this was a hypothesis, since he didn't actually try it out and had no other proof), then he would have no certainty anymore concerning his existence. From there, he (fallaciously) concludes "that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature resides only in thinking, and which, in order to exist, has no need of place and is not dependent on any material thing".

This conclusion is the starting point of Descartes' dualism. From now on, he will assert the existence of two different substances: **the mental substance** (in Latin: *res cogitans*, in French: *la substance pensante*) and **the extended substance** (in Latin: *res extensa*, in French: *la substance étendue*), that is the material, non-thinking world.

4) The proofs of the existence of God:

Aside from those two substances, a third one will now appear in Descartes' **ontology**: God. Here are the three demonstrations.

First proof, Descartes considers that he is an **imperfect** being, but one who is able to conceive of an **idea of perfection**; he concludes that this idea has necessarily been put in his mind by a being that *is* perfect; and this is proof that a perfect being does exist.

Second proof, Descartes asserts that what is imperfect necessarily depends on what is perfect; being himself imperfect, and existing, he therefore depends on the existence of a perfect being, on whom the existence of everything that is imperfect depends.

Third proof, Descartes asserts that the idea of perfection necessarily includes existence, because not existing is less perfect than existing; since existence is part of the idea of perfection, God exists.

These three proofs will allow Descartes to take the next step: since God exists – as the substance that allows everything that exists to continue existing – and since God is perfect, **it is impossible for God to deceive us** (deception= imperfection); therefore the information we receive from our senses can be trusted, and the existence of the extended substance (the material world), after being questioned, is reaffirmed.

In the years and centuries to come, several thinkers would show the weaknesses of Descartes' arguments. An important contemporary **critic** of Descartes was Pierre Gassendi, a French philosopher who pointed out that "the only claim that is indubitable [in the *cogito ergo sum*] is the claim that there is cognitive activity present"[64]; in other words, it is fallacious to say that it is the subjectivity, the "I", that does the thinking. Some better formulations would be for example: "thinking is occurring", or, as Nietzsche proposed, "it thinks" (like one would say "it rains"). Numerous criticisms have also been levelled at Cartesian dualism: Descartes is said to have drawn an ontological conclusion from epistemological premises, asserting two realities where there should only be two means of knowing reality. Behavioral sciences and neurosciences also criticized the Cartesian interpretation, arguing that it made it impossible to understand the interactions between

[64] Saul Fisher, "Pierre Gassendi" (2005), Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy.

mind and body. The question remains open to this day: can human consciousness theorize about what human consciousness is?

As Masters and Possessors of Nature

For Descartes, humans are the only ones to possess reason; they are the only ones to participate in the mental substance. **Animals** do not, and were considered by the French scientist to be some kind of complex **machines**. This mechanical view of nature has consequences: human beings are deemed to be superior to animals, animals have no souls, and, last but not least, evolution is not possible. Therefore, this aspect of his theory would be abandoned, swept away over the course of the 19th century.

But human superiority remained deeply rooted in Western culture, reinforced by Christianity and the success of science. Let us recall Descartes' goal: to provide a solid foundation for the new sciences, which he saw as beneficial to humanity. In the *Discourse on the Method* (*Part Six*), he says he seeks "the general good of all men" and sees his discoveries as beneficial to human development. "For they have shown me that it is possible to attain knowledge that is very useful to life, and that instead of the speculative philosophy taught in schools, we can find a practical one, whereby, knowing the force and actions of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens, and all the other bodies that surround us, as distinctly as we know the various trades of our craftsmen, we could employ them in the same way for all the uses to which they are suited, **and thus make ourselves as masters and possessors of Nature**."

Because they would be the only ones to think, Descartes gives humans the **right** to be the masters and the possessors of everything that doesn't think. Four centuries later, the fallacy of such a reasoning is sadly obvious, and the consequences terrifying.

In the same vein, we can observe that Descartes no longer considers God to be the ultimate moral authority, but only as the substance—in this immense machinery that is the world—on which all others depend. The hope of salvation will therefore also begin to shift, abandoning the Paradise promised to those who obey God's moral authority, and turning instead to the inventiveness inherent in human beings in their ability to master the world around them. With the Protestant Reform in 1519, the heliocentric thesis of Copernicus published in 1543, and the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg around 1550, Descartes is there at the root of what we call today **Modernity**, an age that revolutionized our conceptions of the subject "I" and of our place in the universe.

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CHAPTER 9

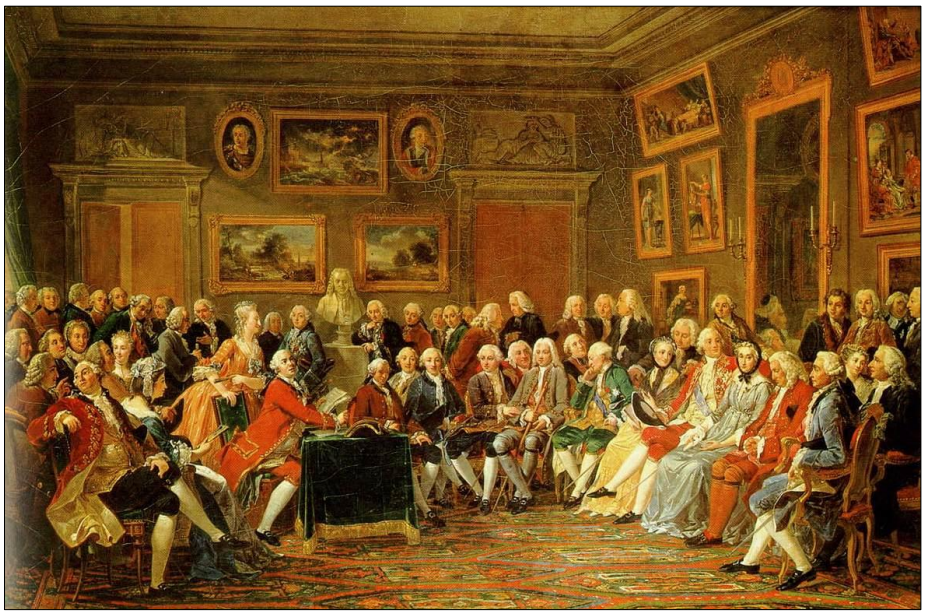
THE ENLIGHTENMENT

New Lights, Old Shadows

While many thinkers would follow the steps of Copernicus, Galileo and Descartes, the foundations of the "new sciences" were still shaky. If, since the Renaissance, a shift had begun to take place that transferred Europeans' hope of salvation from God onto humans, the attacks against Humanism would remain powerful as long as Christianity would have a footing in the political powers.

In the second half of the 17th century, the movement known as the **Enlightenment** was born. Literally, its aim was to 'shed light' upon the world, in the fields of knowledge, morals and politics. During the 18th century, many scientists and philosophers would prompt the idea of progress against dogmatism, and of liberty against authoritarianism. It was, overall, **a combat against obscurantism**.

The word 'obscurantist' was applied by the Enlighteners to any person or power that would deliberately oppose progress and try to restrict the dissemination of knowledge. Thanks to Gutenberg's invention, censorship was losing ground, and many a book that had been forbidden now circulated across Europe from hand to hand. Men would meet in schools, Universities and Academies – all across Europe and in the "New World" –, they would discuss in coffeehouses, masonic Lodges and debating societies. Still, "progress" excluded women, who were kept aside from nearly all those places, and denied access to scientific tools. Only a handful, belonging to the bourgeoisie, was able to share in this movement by hosting salons, inviting men of science to exchange ideas.



Reading of Voltaire's tragedy, in the salon of Marie Thérèse Rodet Geoffrin in 1755, by Lemonnier, c. 1812.

Meanwhile, the political world underwent important changes. The Thirty Years' War ended in 1648 with the **Peace of Westphalia**, a series of treaties that stopped the wars of religion and put Catholics and Protestants on an equal footing before the law. Moreover, it created the first hints of what would emerge around 100 years later as the national modern State. Europe was still for the time being ruled by monarchs, haloed with the legitimacy of the divine right of kings. But the Republican ideas were gaining ground, thanks to the philosophers of the Enlightenment. Their influence in England (Locke, Hume), in France (Montaigne, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau), in Germany (Kant), in Italy (Vico), were central to this development. It was a turning-point that would see the "triumph" of reason over faith, and of equality over servitude. The balance of power would eventually be overturned during the second half of the 18th century, with the United States' Declaration of Independence in 1776, and the French Revolution in 1789. Still, their first constitutions both began with an invocation to God, a figure still seen as the origination of all legitimate power.

Along the same lines, obscurantism only disappeared to be transformed into something else. **Information is power; whoever controls the information always manages an important advantage**. At the hand of new governments – and at the hand of the first big private companies that emerged over the course of the 19th century – it will wear the name of ideology, propaganda, disinformation, and targeted marketing. Indeed, ignorance can be obtained through restricted access to information, or, in a liberal society, through the production of false knowledge[65]. Its aim can be to sell shampoo or fertilizers, but also to build up hatred against an Other (usually against a designated "enemy" or minority), or to make people more fearful and obedient.

Against obscurantism, the thinkers of the 17th and 18th centuries had a maxim: *Sapere aude*, the Latin for "**Dare to know**". They asked of themselves to go out of their comfort zone, doubt, and re-think everything that had been thought before. How do we know? What do we know? How much can we know? **Epistemology** would become of great importance to the new scientific world, while inventions and techniques made thanks to the development of sciences would be boosted in a dramatic way.

Rationalism & Empiricism

At the time, epistemological questions focused upon knowing to what extent our knowledge is dependent on our sense experience. With two opposite stances: the Rationalists thought that reason is first, that our notions of things are **innate** and don't need the senses to be real; the Empiricists thought that the senses are first and that all our ideas and notions are **acquired**, consequences of sense experience[66].

[65] The science that studies the production of ignorance is called *agnotology*.
[66] Cf. Peter Markie (2017) in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
URL : https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rationalism-empiricism

The Rationalists argued that there are cases where reason exceeds the information that our senses can give us. For example Descartes, with his first proof of God in *A Discourse on the Method*, implied that the idea of a perfect being was innate to him (he says that it was "put" in his mind by God). The senses could not give us access to this idea, since they are imperfect, and since the material things that the senses give us access to are also imperfect. Therefore, the idea of perfection can only be attained through intuition (= a rational insight, *clear* and *distinct*). But once Descartes had found a "true idea" using this inductive method, he allowed himself to use deductive reasoning. He had the intuition that God exists, and from there, deduced that because God is perfect, God could not want to deceive us; therefore our sense experience is valid…

The Empiricists argued the opposite: the senses are the origin of our notions and ideas. It is sense experience that provides the information; therefore what we have in mind is not innate, it is acquired. They agreed with the Rationalists on the fact that experience doesn't seem to provide the material for every idea we have, but their conclusion was different. Instead of saying that these ideas must be innate, they opted for **scepticism**[67]: the validity of these ideas might be doubtful, thus they couldn't possibly take them for the first principles of their philosophy.

An important part of this discussion concerns mathematics and the status of the diverse sciences which use them. What of numbers to begin with? We know that 3 is bigger than 2 intuitively, and we know that 2 + 2 = 4 because of course we can count it on our fingers, but 2111 + 4340? This operation is easier to make in our mind, rather than with our fingers. So this operation somehow belongs to a special kind of mental object.

David Hume, by Allan Ramsay, 1766.

Instead of saying that they are innate, **David Hume**[68], a Scottish Empiricist, argued that 1) we receive impressions through our senses, 2) these impressions form in our mind the ideas of the numbers. Taking the next step, he said that all of our **simple ideas** come directly from simple impressions (for example numbers from 0 to 10), while **complex ideas** (for example the number 19'384) don't necessarily come from complex impressions, but can be formed through the combination of simple ideas. Ultimately, this will lead Hume to differentiate between two kinds of mental objects:

> All the objects of human reason or inquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, "Relations of Ideas," and "Matters of Fact." Of the first are the sciences of Geometry, Algebra, and Arithmetic, and, in short, every affirmation which is either intuitively or demonstratively

[67] From the Greek σκεπτικός, skeptikos, "who considers, examines carefully". In common English, someone who is called a sceptic is someone who doesn't believe, but asks for solid proofs.
[68] David Hume (1711-1776) was a Scottish philosopher, historian and economist. He was born in Edinburgh, where he went to school and was taught by disciples of Newton.

> certain. That the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the square of the two sides is a proposition which expresses a relation between these figures. That three times five is equal to half of thirty expresses a relation between these numbers. Propositions of this kind are discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe. Though there never were a circle or triangle in nature, the truths demonstrated by Euclid would forever retain their certainty and evidence. Matters of fact, which are the second objects of human reason, are not ascertained in the same manner, nor is our evidence of their truth, however great, of a like nature with the foregoing. The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible, because it can never imply a contradiction and is conceived by the mind with the same facility and distinctness as if ever so conformable to reality.[69]

A) For example: we know as a **matter of fact** that unicorns do not exist. But we can think of unicorns, conceive of them, and this idea proves to be as clear and distinct as its opposite. So this is the result of impressions from the senses (we have seen a horse + we have seen a narwhal or another animal with horns) and we have formed the concept of the unicorn in our imagination by combining diverse elements; yet this object of the mind doesn't relate consistently with other elements.

B) Concerning the **relations of ideas**, Hume indicates that, however complex, we still get our ideas in the first place through impressions of our senses. Ideas present themselves to our imagination, they are dynamic and in correlation with other ideas. Moreover, they seem coherent, which makes them seem to us understandable (and sometimes self-evident). The relations of ideas arise from pure conceptual thought and logical operations. Hume identifies seven kinds of relations, that he separates into two types: 1) the ones that "can be the objects of knowledge and certainty": resemblance, contrariety, degrees in quality and proportions in quantity or number; 2) the ones that are rather uncertain: identity, relations of time and space, and causation.

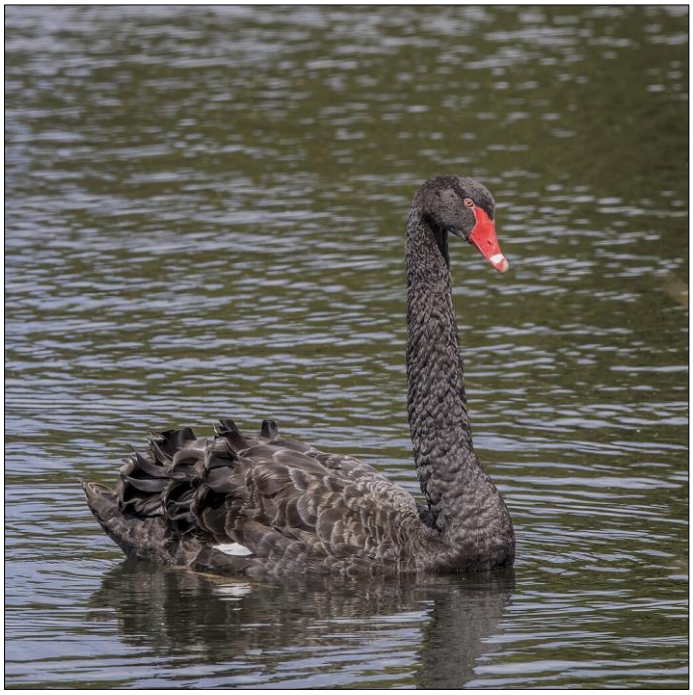
The relations of the second type, although they do not provide us with certainty, are important because they give us the bases for **probable reasoning**, i.e. reasoning about matter of facts. *And that would prove to be a problem…*

If causality is merely probable – in other words a belief, a result of our mental habits – then it means that we don't know why our equations in the field of physics actually work. We are used to the fact that they work, but their "truth," ultimately, could only be attributed to the experience we have of repeated conjunctions of events.

This is **the metaphor of the black swan**. Juvenal, a Roman author from the 2nd century CE, spoke of a "bird as rare on earth as a black swan," because at the time Europeans had never seen such a bird, so talking about a black swan was like talking about an impossible creature. However, a black swan was sighted, apparently for the first time by a European, in 1697 in Australia... Since then, the "black swan" has been used as a metaphor to highlight the fragility of any system of thought. A theory asserts that all swans are white, and we continue to believe this as long as all the swans we see are indeed white (this is a repeated conjunction of events); but when we see a black swan, then this theory is refuted, and what we held to be true seems... shaky.

[69] David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), Section IV, Part 1.

Hume's skepticism would have a profound influence on a German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, whom we will now study. How can we be sure that what we know is really known? *Without a shadow of a doubt?*



Black swan (*Cygnus atratus*), near Scottsdale, Tasmania (Australia).

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CHAPTER 10

Immanuel Kant

The Clock of Königsberg

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804 CE) was born into a modest family in Königsberg, Eastern Prussia (today Kaliningrad, Russia). His father was a saddle-maker. His mother, who gave birth to eleven children (Kant was the fourth), was very religious: a Protestant Pietist.

It is remarkable to note that, throughout his life, Kant never left his native province: he would study in Königsberg, teach in Königsberg and die in Königsberg. In part, this seems due to a fragile constitution; but it met also Kant's lifestyle.

Historical Lutheran cathedral in Kaliningrad (Russia) formerly Königsberg, built in the 14th century.

In 1740, he began studying at the University, aiming to graduate in theology. Meanwhile, he discovered physics and became an admirer of the works of Isaac Newton. Among philosophers, Kant studied especially Leibniz and Wolff, two Rationalists, anti-dualist Germans from the second half of the 17th century.

In 1746, his father died, and Kant therefore had to work. He began teaching as a private tutor in rich families of the region, an activity that would considerably slow down his studies. Only in 1755 did he graduate and receive his accreditation. From that year on, he became a teacher at the University of Königsberg, first as a *Privatdozent* (i.e. a qualified high level teacher) then a titular Professor, starting in 1770.

He began writing his major work, *Critique of Pure Reason*, which he would publish for the first time in 1781. In this book, Kant questioned what we can know using reason *only*—in the title, the word "critique" (from the Greek *krinein*, 'to separate, to judge') means discussing the limits of the knowledge we can attain through the use of reason.

In the following years, he achieved and published many other works, proving his encyclopaedic and philosophical ambition: *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* in 1785 (famous for the ethical concept of "categorical imperative"), *Critique of Practical Reason* in 1788 (a continuation and clarification of the previous), *Critique of Judgement* in

1790 (in which Kant analyses the question of finality, particularly of beauty in nature and the arts), *Perpetual Peace* in 1795 (a political project to be implemented by governments) and *The Metaphysics of Morals* in 1797, among others[70].

Throughout these years, Kant kept such strict habits that he came to be nicknamed "the clock of Königsberg." He never married, preferring a solitary life. He arranged everything around him in order to live a long and healthy life. Every morning, Lampe, an ex-member of the military who had become his house-servant, would come to wake him up at 4.55am, shouting "*Es is Zeit!*" Five minutes later, Kant was sitting at his desk, beginning to work. He used part of the day to study and teach, eating at precise hours, always going to bed at 10pm. Every day he took a walk, on a fixed path and at a fixed time. The legend has it that only two events ever disturbed the regularity of his stroll: in 1762, because he wanted to buy a copy of Rousseau' *Social Contract*, and in 1789, to buy the newspaper that gave an account of the French revolution.

Portrait of Immanuel Kant by J. G. Becker, 1768.

But, against all odds, Kant was also a lover of luncheons, good food and intense discussion. In 1827, British writer Thomas de Quincey wrote a narrative based on the testimonies of several of Kant's disciples and friends, who had been regularly invited to the lunches organised by the philosopher of Königsberg. He would invite only men, and it was for Kant a time of relaxation and enjoyment through discussion: "The subjects of conversation at Kant's table were drawn chiefly from natural philosophy, chemistry, meteorology, natural history, and above all, from politics." The lunches sometimes went on late into the afternoon…

> It was not only in the character of a companion that Kant shone, but also as a most courteous and liberal host, who had no greater pleasure than in seeing his guests happy and jovial, and rising with exhilarated spirits from the mixed pleasures—intellectual and liberally sensual—of his Platonic banquets. Chiefly, perhaps, with a view to the sustaining of this tone of genial hilarity, he showed himself somewhat of an artist in the composition of his dinner parties. Two rules there were which he obviously observed, and I may say invariably: the first was, that the company should be miscellaneous; this for the sake of securing sufficient variety to the conversation: and accordingly his parties presented as much variety as the world of Königsberg afforded, being drawn from all the modes of life, men in office, professors, physicians, clergymen, and enlightened merchants. His second rule was, to have a due balance of young

[70] From the list above, we can spot the three major branches of Kant's philosophy: theoretical (what can I know?), practical (what must I do?) and aesthetical (what can I enjoy?).

men, frequently of very young men, selected from the students of the university, in order to impress a movement of gaiety and juvenile playfulness on the conversation (…).[71]

Although Kant's books may seem painstakingly serious, let's keep in mind this figure of a very social man, happy to entertain, yet always in control of his pleasures.

Kant's philosophy proved very influential during his lifetime, receiving much critical attention from German thinkers like Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and Novalis, joined later by many others, from Schopenhauer (19th c.) to Michel Foucault (20th c.).

Thirty years after Kant's death in 1804, the poet Heinrich Heine wrote: "What a strange contrast between the outer life of the man and his destructive, world-convulsing thoughts!" Comparing him to Robespierre, he observed that both men "represented in the highest the type of provincial bourgeois. Nature had destined them to weigh coffee and sugar, but Fate determined that they should weigh other things and placed on the scales of the one a king, on the scales of the other a god."[72]

What Can We Know?

{subject, phenomenon}

In 1783, Kant wrote that it was **Hume's charge against dogmatism** that spurred him to follow the path of the Enlightenment and find solutions for the development of philosophical thought[73]. How can we philosophize without getting lost in metaphysical quarrels about God, on which so many thinkers have written contradictory statements?

Kant thought that Hume' scepticism was to be praised for its carefulness; but at the same time, misled scepticism could stop further inquiry, because the sceptic could end up saying that we can know nothing. This, of course, would prove negative for the development of the sciences. Therefore the question for Kant would be where to draw the line, so as not to compromise the possibility of finding reliable knowledge.

Both Rationalism and Empiricism **had failed** to resolve the problem of the link between the knowing subject and its objects (they ended up invoking God to resolve the issue at

[71] Thomas de Quincey, *The Last Days of Immanuel Kant*, 1827.
URL: https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/d/de_quincey/thomas/last-days-of-immanuel-kant/
[72] Heinrich Heine, *History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany*, 1934.
URL: http://www.stephenhicks.org/2014/11/19/heine-on-kant-and-robespierre-as-terrorists/
[73] Kant wrote in his *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*: "I openly confess, the suggestion of David Hume was the very thing, which many years ago first interrupted my dogmatic slumber, and gave my investigations in the field of speculative philosophy quite a new direction. I was far from following him in the conclusions at which he arrived by regarding, not the whole of his problem, but a part, which by itself can give us no information. If we start from a well-founded, but undeveloped, thought, which another has bequeathed to us, we may well hope by continued reflection to advance farther than the acute man, to whom we owe the first spark of light. "

hand, a slippery path when all's said and done[74]). Rationalism couldn't prove the link between reason's certainties and material realities; while Empiricism couldn't prove the logical necessity of laws deduced from the experience of the senses (which prompted Hume to deem *causality* uncertain).

In order to overcome this difficulty, Kant first differentiated between two aspects of reason, **to think** and **to know**: not everything we think is, strictly speaking, knowledge. Indeed, human reason has a tendency to think about things which are beyond the limits of what we can know. In his book *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant thus staged a trial, in which REASON was at the same time the accused and the judge. From this critique of reason, he concluded that while we can think about anything, we can only know – truly know – what appears to us within the boundaries of **pure reason** (pure = independent from the experience of the senses). Not because the senses might deceive us – Kant affirms that the material world does exist and that we don't need to doubt it, he's quite the Empiricist in that regard – but because the only way to produce objective knowledge is through understanding reason itself.

Indeed, for Kant, we never know a thing in itself, but **only as it appears to our reason**. Therefore, our knowledge is always determined by the relation between a knowing subject and an object. Kant calls the object as it appears to us a **phenomenon**[75].

We can understand how Kant came to this conclusion through the following analogy: a) I *can* only see what *can appear* to me, it appears to me only because I have eyes to see it, and the way it appears to me is conditioned by my eyes' nature; b) I *can* only know what is *understandable*, it is understandable only because I have the faculty of reason, and the way it is understandable to me is thus conditioned by the nature of reason.

In other words, our mental structure determines the way we relate to experiences that seem to speak, at least in part, the same language. So the question is now: **what are the conditions** – in the knowing subject, in pure reason – **of how we understand?**

Kant distinguishes two main conditions that are inherent to reason: **1) forms of pure intuition:** space and time, and **2) forms of pure understanding:** the logical categories (quality, quantity, relationships, and modalities, cf. Aristotle). Because everything that will ever be understandable to us, will be understandable to us within space and time and within the boundaries of the logical categories, these two sets of conditions are necessarily inherent to all knowledge that is certain.

[74] For example, Descartes needed God (inductively proven) to ensure the validity of sense experience. Kant distanced himself from these kinds of demonstrations by calling the philosophers who made them *builders of air* (Luftbaumeister), either *dreamers of reason* (=Rationalists) or *dreamers of sensation* (=Empiricists).

[75] From the ancient Greek φαινόμενον, 'thing appearing to view'.

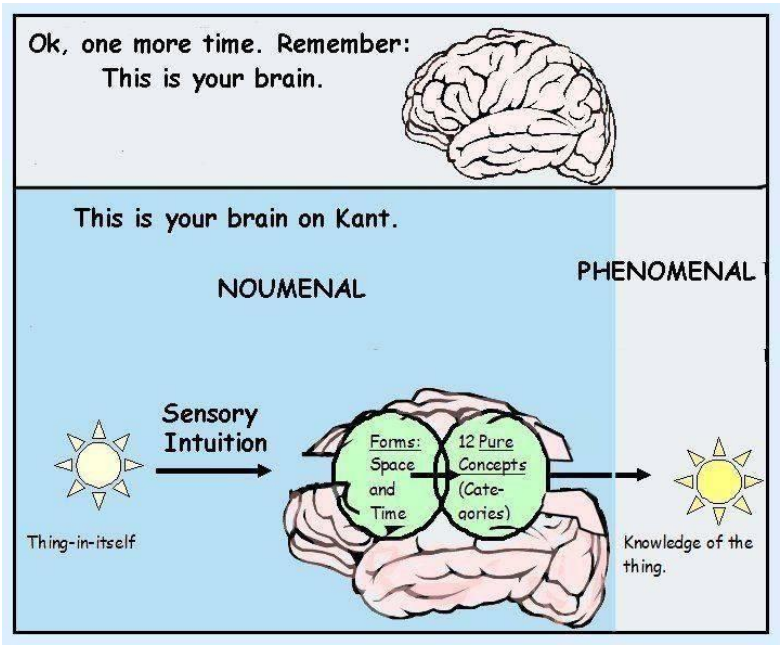
What Can't We Know?

{thing-in-itself, noumenon}

It also means that we cannot know an object outside of our relationship with it — we cannot know the **thing-in-itself** (German: *Ding an sich*). Then why talk about it at all? Because, says Kant, the thing-in-itself is, for pure reason, the fundament of the phenomenon: although we cannot prove it exists, we need to think that *there is* a thing-in-itself in order to think how it appears to us, i.e. to think its phenomenon[76].

> What sound does a tree falling in a forest make if no one is around to hear it? Answer: none, because sound is a phenomenon that requires a subject to perceive it.

Consequence: of the thing-in-itself, we only ever know aspects; other aspects always remain unseen, unknown, because un-appearing/not-understandable to us. Kant calls **noumenon** everything that we do not know about an object. In order, hypothetically, to know the noumenon, we would need to be able to switch to other conditions of possibility, to change our forms of intuition and understanding like one would change glasses. Since this is impossible to do, we have to acknowledge that there are limits to what we can know; with the awareness that what limits us is also what gives us to understand what *is* understandable to us here and now[77].



Let's consider first an object of our daily experience: a tree. What I can know of a tree is its phenomenon, how it appears to me, through space, time, and the categories of my

[76] Nietzsche, a famous anti-Kantian, wrote that the philosopher of Königsberg thus found a way to reintroduce the platonician division between appearance and reality. Cf. *Twilight of the Idols*, IV. For Nietzsche, there's absolutely no 'need' for a thing-in-itself to think the phenomenon; moreover, to him, the concept of thing-in-itself stands like a new moral judge (a new 'true' reality) over the world of appearances. Cf. TI, IX, 29.

[77] The question of knowing whether it is possible to change some of our conditions remains open.

understanding. If I change my way of thinking to the tree, it will change my understanding of it, the way it is understandable to me, to a certain extent. But since I cannot open my mind to all the ways of understanding the tree at the same time – and since some aspects (I cannot know how many nor which ones) are alien to my mind's own structure –, there will always be something of the tree that I won't be able to grasp. Conclusion: I am unable to know the tree-in-itself; but I have to suppose that the tree-in-itself exists, since it is the fundament of my understanding that there is a tree.

Let's consider now an object that does not belong to our sense experience, but only to reason: God. God, by definition, exists beyond time and space; yet we can only know what is within time and space, because our reason exists within space and time; therefore we cannot know God. The existence or non-existence of God cannot be proved.

How Do We Know?

{a priori, a posteriori / analytic, synthetic}

Thinking, for us, is possible only within the **conditions of possibility** of reason; we cannot surpass these pure forms of intuition and understanding, they condition our possible knowledge completely. Kant would say they are transcendental (=unsurpassable, all-conditioning). But to know that and to limit ourselves to the realm of the phenomena wouldn't be enough to stop us from making mistakes. Let's come back to the start.

One important type of thoughts is **beliefs**: they vary from one individual (or one group, or society, or culture) to another, and are not part of the settings of pure reason, but the result of sense experience, education, etc. Beliefs are not the product of pure reason; but even so they *can* be true. To know if they are effectively true, we'd have to test them within the conditions of pure reason. Indeed, one big error would be to mistake beliefs for conditions of possibility of pure reason[78], instead of putting beliefs to the **test** of the transcendental forms. If we do just that, it could open up possibilities of knowledge in vast fields of experimental sciences.

With the notion of 'belief', we see how Kant recycled the points of view of the Rationalists and Empiricists: regarding the *innate vs acquired* debate, Kant rejected the metaphysical speculations (God) and concluded that what we actually do is think of the phenomena through different modes. He identifies two pairs that we will now examine: a priori/a posteriori, and analytical/synthetic.

The first distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* is **epistemological**, answering the question: on what basis do we know what we state? Is it through pure reason, or through sense experience?

[78] That is an error that Kant made himself: he posited that time is a homogeneous condition, which Einstein's theory of relativity has proven to be false.

> An *a priori* proposition is one that is valid before any experience of the senses. It belongs to pure reason. For example, when we say that "a wall is a wall", the identity between the two terms of the proposition makes it necessary and independent from experience. The same goes for Kant with time and space: they are necessary, universal and independent from our senses. The equation 2 + 2 = 4 is also an *a priori* proposition, since it does not rely on sense experience; indeed, to repeat it will not make it any truer than it was already *a priori*.
>
> On the other hand, an *a posteriori* proposition is one made after a sense experience. It is, in other words, an empirical statement. For example, when we say "the wall is white", the concept of 'white' is not inherent to the concept of 'wall', which implies that we used our senses to associate one with the other. The same goes with "it is raining outside", etc.

The second distinction between *analytic* and *synthetic* is **logical and semantic**, answering the question: what makes a given proposition a true proposition? Does the proposition depend only on the definitions of its terms, or does it rely on how the world actually is?

> An *analytic* proposition is one whose predicate is contained in its subject concept. For example, "all bodies are extended" is an analytic statement, since the concept of 'extension' is inherent to the concept of body (by definition, a body occupies a space). Other examples: "all triangles have three angles", "water is wet", etc.
>
> On the other hand, a *synthetic* proposition is one whose predicate amplifies the subject. "All bodies are heavy" is a synthetic statement, since the concept of 'heaviness' is not inherent to the concept of body (a body can be heavy or light). Other examples: "this angle makes 67°", or "the water is muddy".

These four modes of thinking combine with each other, so that *a priori* propositions are either *analytic* or *synthetic*; while *a posteriori* propositions can only be *synthetic*:

	a priori	**a posteriori**
analytic	The wall is the wall Water is wet All bodies are extended 3 < 5	Ø
synthetic	Water is H^2O 2 + 2 = 4 This angle makes 67° (if you deduct it from the other angles)	The wall is white The water is muddy This angle makes 67° (if you use a protractor)

Let us stress the importance of ***synthetic a priori*** propositions, since they are the ones that allow us, according to Kant, to amplify our knowledge while working only within the boundaries of pure reason. It's there that we are able to test the results of experiences and work out the conditions of possibility they imply.

Let's take the Copernican discovery as an example. The Italian astronomer made observations (synthetic a posteriori), then used mathematics (synthetic a priori) to predict when he would be able to observe the planets in other positions; since his predictions proved true (synthetic a posteriori), it proved the validity of his equations and that the Earth turns around the Sun (a new definition of the concept "Earth", analytic a priori). Backwards, this also proved, in the eyes of Kant, that mathematics are valid not only by happenstance (cf. Hume) but because they are transcendental. Mathematics are *synthetic* and *a priori* – meaning that they are true not only inside the mind, but true relatively to the reality of the phenomena – and by using them, we can demonstrate *synthetic a posteriori* propositions which are true.

*

Where Hume said that every idea ultimately came down to sense experience, Kant said that some of our reasonings (cf. beliefs *vs* knowledge) share with reality the same conditions of possibility, therefore enabling us to know truths with certainty. Rather than empiricism, Kant opened the field of transcendentalism: what are the conditions of possibility that are common to us and to the phenomena we observe?

Over the course of the 19th century, this debate will be greatly transformed by Darwin's theory of evolution and the rise of sociological thinking. What Kant determined as *a priori* would then be evaluated through the lens of human development, whether of the species (phylogeny) or of the individual (ontogeny). The debate about "what are our common conditions of possibility" would expand toward other human characteristics (behaviours, organisation, psychology, etc.) and soon get mixed up with the nature/nurture debate that would pit biologists and sociologists against each other. On the other hand, the universalism of such conditions would be strongly criticized, since many have proven not universal at all, but rather cultural and paradigmatic.

How Must We Act?

1) PRACTICAL REASON AND THE REGULATIVE IDEA OF FREEDOM

Following the Greek philosophers (*theoria* and *praxis*) and the Latin philosophers (*vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*), Kant differentiated between two kinds of reason: theoretical reason and practical reason. The goal of the former is to attain knowledge, the goal of the latter to act according to what is good. In line with what we've seen previously, we can only know what is "good" by placing ourselves within the limits of reason.

Practical reason is turned towards everyday life, it is the reason we use when we ask ourselves what we should do, what our priorities are and how to make decisions. But since God has been deemed unknowable, what can guarantee the moral high ground? Along with God, Kant also concluded that the concept of 'free will' is a hypothesis which we can prove neither true nor false. How could we make moral decisions without free will? Does Kant's approach lead to a dead end?

But Kant solved the problem with a trick. True, we cannot know objectively that humans have the freedom to choose between one action and another; everything might well be ruled only through mechanical causality, with no free will interfering whatsoever… but we don't know that for certain either! Therefore, the best (most rational) attitude to maintain regarding moral questions would be to posit freedom as a working hypothesis. Asserting that freedom is real will serve our moral life much more than asserting it isn't—indeed, if it isn't real, why strive for what is good?

Freedom of the will thus appears in Kant's moral philosophy as a **regulative idea**. We cannot know (theoretically) if freedom exists or not, but since our problem in practical life is not to know *for knowledge's sake* but to know *how to act*, we shall use freedom as a premise that will allow us to reason. For Kant, human choice is therefore grounded.

2) TO BE MORAL = HUMAN AUTONOMY + GOOD WILL

With freedom of the will now at the core of all moral actions, it has also become what defines humans. Kant posits that in every human being exists this capacity by which we can rule ourselves according to reason. Which is precisely the point: for Kant, we don't have the choice between good and evil, like in many moral systems, but a choice **is** a free choice only when we act according to the inherent order of reason.

If we don't follow the order of practical reason – if we don't act according to the good as proven within the conditions of pure reason –, then we are not free. We might very well do the right thing by happenstance, or because we were forced or educated to do it (through moral religious codes for example, or State laws, parents, etc.), therefore doing the right thing without understanding why it is right. Yet this, for Kant, does not qualify as a moral action. For it is only when we act according to the order of pure reason **knowingly** that we are actually exerting our freedom, making our actions truly moral ones.

This would lead Kant to differentiate between two types of rules:

1) **Heteronomous rules** include any kind of State laws, religious commandments, social codes of conduct, customs, educative rules, etc. whose legitimacy exists only *a posteriori*, as a product of experience or as belief. Such rules are always relative (to a country, a culture, a family, etc.) and never universal. For Kant, rules of this type are the product of **prudence** ('I should' = hypothetical imperative), rather than morality.

2) **Autonomous rules** on the other hand are rules which are known *a priori* by reason. Therefore they are valid for all humans, in all places, at all times. They are universal, and they impose themselves to us unconditionally from within the categories of practical reason ('I must' = categorical imperative), whatever our beliefs and goals.

This distinction means that the laws of certain States or certain religious commandments may be contradicted by the autonomous rules of practical reason. If this

happens, then we must follow the latter, even if it puts our existence at risk. And it is easy to get that this will not please everyone... which leads us to ask *why* we would do it.

What is our motivation? Kant based his reasoning on the notion of **good will**. To act with good will is to act because a given action is the right thing to do, not because of any kind of reward or penalty: the right thing will be done because it *is* right.

True moral action is therefore **disinterested**. It is not egoistic, but neither is it altruistic. This was criticized by many subsequent philosophers: somebody who acts because it is morally right will still get the satisfaction of having done so; it may give that person a certain peace of mind; it might even be but an opportunity. On the other hand, let's keep in mind that acting morally could lead to losing one's job, one's friends, and one's life.

*

To explore this question further, it is interesting to compare Kant's theory with that of Lawrence Kohlberg (1927-1987), who studied the psychological development of moral sense:

Level	Stage	Description
Pre-conventional	**1. Heteronomous (2-6 years)** 2. Instrumental and individualistic (5-9 years)	**Avoid punishment by obeying authority** Seeking self-interest
Conventional	**3. Normative and interpersonal (7-12 years)** 4. Social system (10-15 years)	**Preserve group rules/conventions** Conform to society's rules/conventions
Post-conventional	**5. Human rights and the common good (from age 12)** 6. Universal principles (some adults)	**Freely chosen consensus-building** Following universal moral principles

3) THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

Kant proposed different formulas to capture the essence of practical reason, so as to be able to use it in everyday life. With each formula, he tried "to bring an Idea of reason closer to intuition (by means of a certain analogy) and thus nearer to feeling"[79].

How do we know which rule is an autonomous rule? How can we test a course of action? How can we create laws that would qualify as truly moral? The three formulas of the categorical imperative were created by Kant to answer such questions.

[79] Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:435.

1) Universalize:

"Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it becomes a universal law."[80]

➔ The formula indicates a procedure for moral reasoning:

I. Decide on a maxim for action (e.g. it is right for me to break a promise).

II. Recast it as a universal law (e.g. it is right for everybody to break a promise).

III. Consider whether a world governed by this law is conceivable (e.g. in a world where everybody breaks their promises, can morality exist? No it cannot, therefore a world governed by this law is not morally conceivable).

IV. Ask yourself whether you would want to act on your maxim in such a world (e.g. if everybody breaks their promises, keeping mine would prove detrimental to me).

V. If all the above points are a hit, then your action is morally right (in the example above it is not, since the universalized maxim contradicts itself and cannot be willed).

➔ This allows Kant, first, to get rid of the "I am an exception" moral dead end (e.g. "I will break a promise I made, but I am the only one to do it, so it's OK"); second, universalization can make contradictions appear, and places the thinking subject directly in the sphere of pure reason (where conditions that are universal apply).

➔ Examples:

a) Can the proposition "it is right to steal" pass the test of universalization? The notion of 'stealing' presupposes the existence of private property; but if the proposition was universalized, then there would be no private property anymore; therefore the proposition has logically negated itself.

b) Can the proposition "it is right to take whatever I desire" pass the test then? 'Desires' are determined by impulses and inclinations; therefore, to take "whatever" one desires could not qualify as a moral action, since it wouldn't be grounded in practical reason, but in egotistical appetites.

c) What of the proposition "it is right to tell the truth"? It passes the test of universalization, since a world in which everybody tells the truth is morally conceivable. In such a world, we would also apply this rule and tell the truth, since it would be the rational thing to do and would guarantee our own position within it. — Yes, but… wait a minute… What if you are hosting a friend who is being pursued by assassins. The assassins knock on your door and ask if this person has taken refuge in your home. Do you have then to tell the truth, and give your friend to the assassins? Kant, who came up with this scenario, answers YES, telling the truth is always a moral duty (it is an imperative: "I must"). But once you have told the truth, there is no reason why you should let your friend be murdered!

[80] Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:421. Some critiques have looked at this first formula as just another way of stating the Golden Rule: "Treat others how you wish to be treated" (and its negative form: "Do not impose on others what you do not wish for yourself"), but also it looks similar, the Golden Rule is an empirical statement, while the whole of Kant's attempt is to find rules that are *a priori* and necessarily binding.

2) Always treat humanity as an end:

"Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end."[81]

- ➔ Since free will is at the core of all moral action, to use yourself or another person only as a means would imply that you don't recognize yourself and/or that other person as capable of free will; there is a contradiction in doing so while pretending to be moral yourself. Instead, the categorical imperative implies that human beings must be treated always at the same time as ends in themselves.
- ➔ The precision "always at the same time" is important, because Kant's intention here is not to say that we should not treat other people as a means (we do it every day), but to say that we must not treat them only as a means.
- ➔ This formula doesn't concern human beings as persons, but as humans (as rational beings). This is usually what is meant by the notion of 'human dignity'.
- ➔ This formula can be applied efficiently to the question of slavery: a slave owner asserting his right to own another person would violate the categorical imperative, since by denying the moral capacity of "his" slave he would in fact be denying his own morality, which is the only possible source of rights.
- ➔ Kant does not resolve the issue of human beings who do not have the same capacity for reasoning as others or who are not recognized as having equal capacity by others. What about people with mental disabilities? What about children? What about people with Alzheimer's disease? Should there be an age at which one should be considered "morally capable," even though we know that individual development varies from person to person?

3) Be part of the republic of wills:

"Thus the third practical principle follows [from the first two] as the ultimate condition of their harmony with practical reason: the idea of the will of every rational being as *a universally legislating will*."[82]

- ➔ The result of the two first formulas is that we must take on maxims that can be at the same time universal, but which do not infringe on our own freedom nor on the freedom of others. Therefore, it requires that we acknowledge our moral actions as well as the moral actions of others as "a universally legislating will".
- ➔ With this third principle, Kant expresses the arc of the whole structure: it only works completely when all rational beings take part in it and are acknowledged by others while doing so. When that happens, then the moral actions of one person will produce effects that will necessarily benefit all the others – since they are grounded in practical reason – and so on with every one's moral action in a virtuous circle. It could remind us of Plato's notion of justice as harmony.

[81] Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:429.
[82] Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:432.

To conclude this study of Kant's morals, let's remember that 'virtues' like Plato's wisdom, courage and moderation – and the same is true concerning Aristotle's Golden mean – are not considered by Kant to produce actions that would be more or less moral, since every action has to pass the test of practical reason, independently of the attitude or features of a person. Kant's moral is therefore a **deontology**, i.e. normative rules based on whether actions are right or wrong in themselves (*a priori*).

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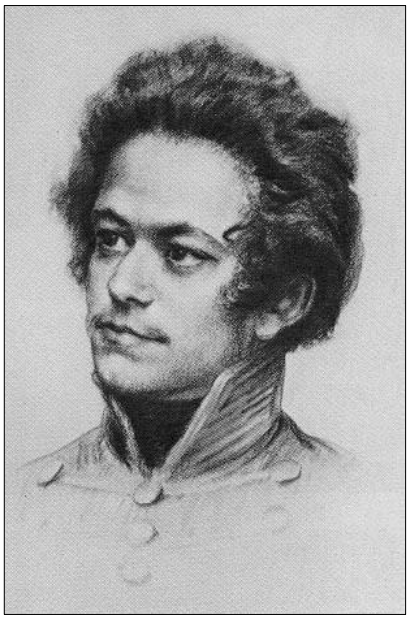
CHAPTER 11

Karl Marx

Cologne, Paris, Brussels, London

Karl Heinrich Marx (1818-1883 CE) was born in Treve – in today's Western Germany – from a relatively wealthy family of Jewish descent (both his grandfathers were rabbis). The third of nine children, he became the eldest son when his brother died in 1819.

Marx's father was the first of his family line to receive a secular education and he grew to be a largely non-religious person, interested in the ideas of the Enlightenment. In the face of the restrictions that oppressed Jewish people at the time, he had converted to Protestantism in order to work as a lawyer in the Kingdom of Prussia. Young Karl Marx was first educated by his father, then as a teenager was sent to the local high school, which was directed by a friend of his father. However, the Prussian government would soon depose him for his liberal ideas and for giving "seditious" literature to the students.



Portrait of the young Karl Marx.

It was also while he was a teenager that Marx met the woman with whom he would share his life. Four years older than him, **Jenny von Westphalen** (1814-1881 CE) and Karl had the same interests for literature and philosophy. Her father – also a friend of Karl's father – was a baron, belonging to the Prussian old ruling class. Which made her a baroness… and she was engaged to a young aristocrat—but, in 1836, she decided to break that engagement to be with Marx, with whom she got engaged. Her father appreciated the young man, so it did not prove a problem for her family, even if breaking an engagement wasn't at all common at the time.

In 1835, Marx graduated and went to University with the desire to study philosophy, but his father pushed him toward more concrete studies. He therefore began studying law in Bonn, then in Berlin, while at the same time trying to find a way to connect with philosophy. The next year he turned 18, and Karl and Jenny got married. Marx should also have undertaken military service, but was excused due to a weakness in his chest. For the rest of his life, health problems would be his companions, and while comfortable living conditions made it easier, he would soon live in much more difficult ones. The next year, in 1838, Marx's father died, leaving the family with a diminished income.

Meanwhile, Marx had found his way to philosophy. In that period German universities were all about Hegel, his philosophy seen (and self-advocated) as the apex of German idealism, born in the aftermath of Kant's transcendentalism. Marx, who got into university shortly after Hegel's death, connected with a philosophical group, the Young Hegelians, in 1837. There he met **Ludwig Feuerbach**, one of Hegel's disciples who had turned against his teacher and was proposing a materialist vision of Hegel's philosophy, which would prove very influential on Marx. Until then, Marx had written works of fiction and non-fiction, studied history of art, did translations from Latin and helped with the edition of one of Hegel's books. His goal was to become a teacher to earn a living. But the Prussian government did not appreciate the new orientation of the Young Hegelians, who were too progressive for the security of the monarchy; Feuerbach paid the price for this enmity, being dismissed from his position at the university. Other liberal thinkers suffered the same fate. These events were to have a decisive influence on Marx. By the time he obtained his doctorate in 1841, he had given up the idea of a teaching post and was turning increasingly to politics.

Marx becomes, in 1842, a journalist for a newspaper in Köln. The *Rheinische Zeitung*, first a hub for radical[83] bourgeois of the Rhineland region, took over the next years a more and more subversive edge. The Prussian government censored it, then altogether banned it. It was time to move away.

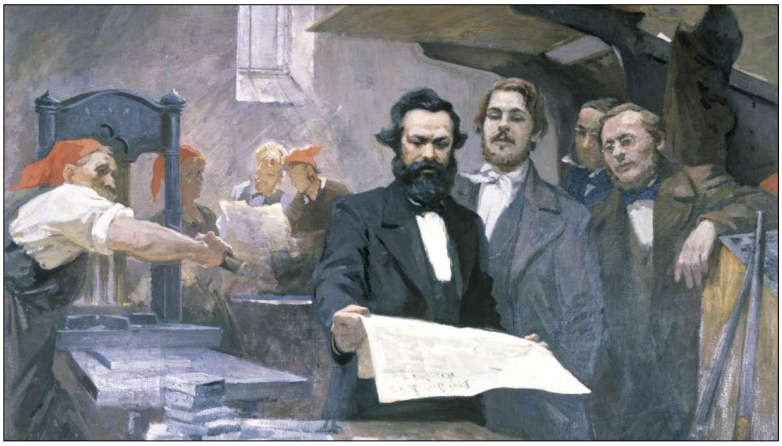


Illustration showing Karl Marx holding a freshly printed copy of the Rheinische Zeitung. © Imago

Karl and Jenny Marx decided to go to Paris and mingled in the French capital's radical circles. There, Marx would meet Heinrich Heine, and the exiled Russian anarchist collectivist Mikhail Bakunin, and later **Friedrich Engels**, with whom he would form a lifelong friendship. Engels was the son of a successful German industrial, and a self-taught philosopher. In 1842 he had moved to Manchester, a major industrial centre for textile manufacturing, where he studied the life conditions of the working class.

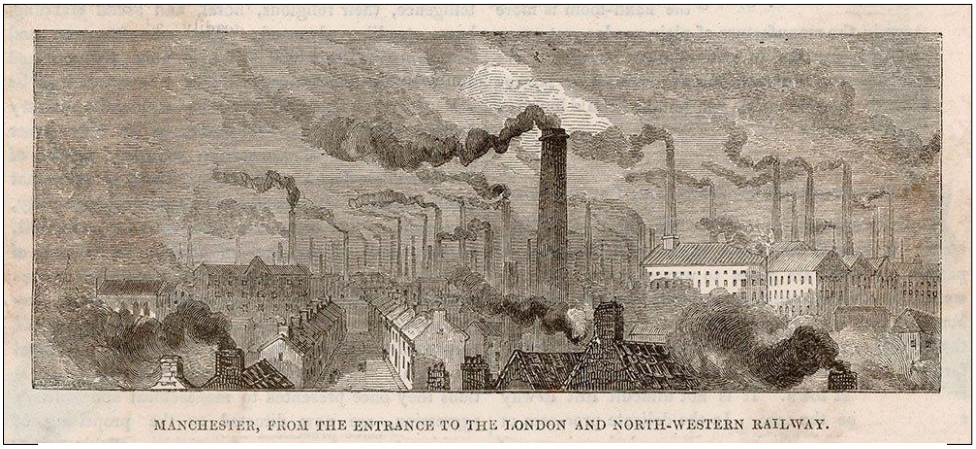
It was during that period in Paris that Marx started to study political economy and the development of capitalism. Together with Engels, they became convinced that the working class – the proletariat – was the force of the future. His first formulation of the notion of 'alienate labour' dates from 1845, as well as his concept of 'historical materialism': the view

[83] At the time, Radicals were people, usually from the bourgeoisie, who were strongly attached to the legacy of 1789. They were anticlerical and defended the universal suffrage.

that the world is not changed by ideas, but by the evolution of the material conditions and relations of power within a society.

Marx continued to write articles and eventually became co-editor of a radical leftist Parisian newspaper. But, through diplomatic pressure, the Prussian government managed to have Marx exiled from France. The family moved to Brussels. There, Marx intensified his political activities. He joined the *League of the Just*, a Christian communist revolutionary organization created by German emigrants; and, with Engels, he travelled to England to meet with other active political groups. During those years, they wrote their first important book, ***The German Ideology***, which contained the most achieved version of historical materialism. Yet the book was censored and banned.

While studying the evolution of bourgeois capitalism, Marx and Engels had come to the conclusion that crises were inherent to the capitalist economy. Since the beginning of the industrial revolution, multiple crises had already taken place (1797, 1810, 1825, 1836) and the two philosophers predicted that another one would happen in 1847, with its usual consequences for the proletarians: multiple bankruptcies creating huge unemployment, famine, revolts, bloody repression. In their eyes, the domination of the bourgeoisie could not last, since the bourgeois were a minority in the face of a growing number of workers who, having lost their own resources as a result of the industrial revolution, had to move *en masse* to the towns and cities where the factories were located.



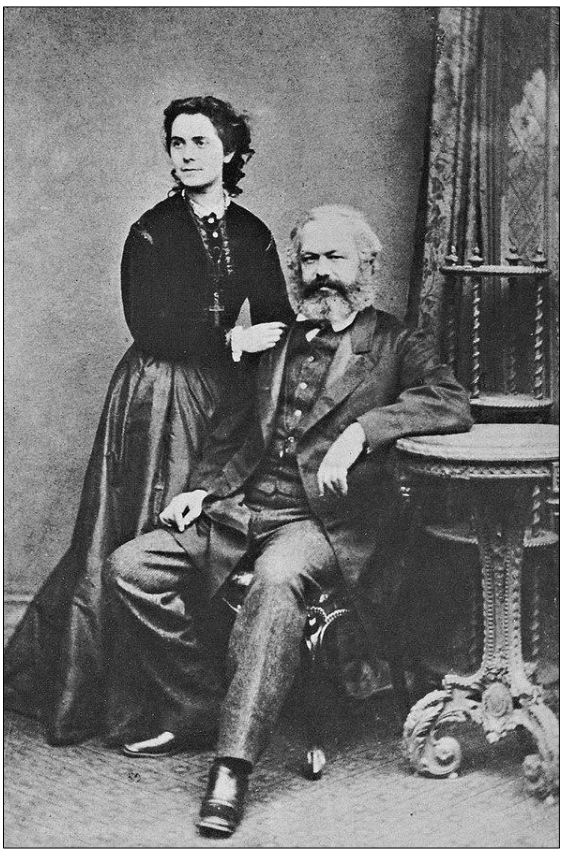
A view of Manchester in 1870, when a dense forest of smoking chimneys dominated the skyline.

Marx and his companions realized that they needed another strategy. In order to organize the working class into a movement that would bring revolution (and not only spontaneous revolts), the *League of the Just* transformed from an underground group into a political party, under the name of the *Communist League*. Written in 1847 and published in 1848, ***The Manifesto of the Communist Party*** was written to support its creation and gather support. As Marx wrote in his *Theses on Feuerbach*:

> The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways—the point however is to change it.[84]

[84] Cf. Marx's Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach, written in preparation for *The German Ideology*.

As predicted, a massive crash happened in 1848, which gave momentum to what would be known as the Revolutions of 1848. In France, it led to the overthrow of the monarchy and the instauration of the Second Republic. Following allegations that he had provided money (after inheriting from his father) to arm a group of Belgian workers, Marx was forced to flee to France, where, given the recent change in government, he believed that he and his family would be safe. From Paris, they rapidly moved back to Köln, where Marx would begin yet another newspaper. In his native country, he became regularly harassed by the police and underwent several trials for his publications… but was acquitted in all of them. Following the revolutions of 1848, the King of Prussia feared revolutions in his own lands, so he pushed for the creation of a new government, and soon counter-revolutionary measures were taken to expunge all radical democrats and revolutionary elements from the country. Marx's newspaper was banned and he was ordered to leave the country. He went back to Paris. But there also the authorities expelled him, considering him a political threat. The Marx family – Jenny and Karl had three children, and she was pregnant with the fourth – decided to move to London, where they would live in one of the poorest neighbourhoods of the British capital[85].



Karl Marx and his daughter Jenny, a left-wing journalist and her father's secretary, in 1869.

In London, Marx would focus on revolutionary activities and mostly on working towards understanding the historical evolution of the situation, in order to be ready for the revolution when the time would be right. The revolutionary movements of 1848 did not produce what Marx expected, so he was determined to understand why. He delved into the study of every major economist that preceded him, from Adam Smith (known for his theory of the *Invisible Hand*, the self-organising free market) to David Ricardo (and his theory of the labour value).

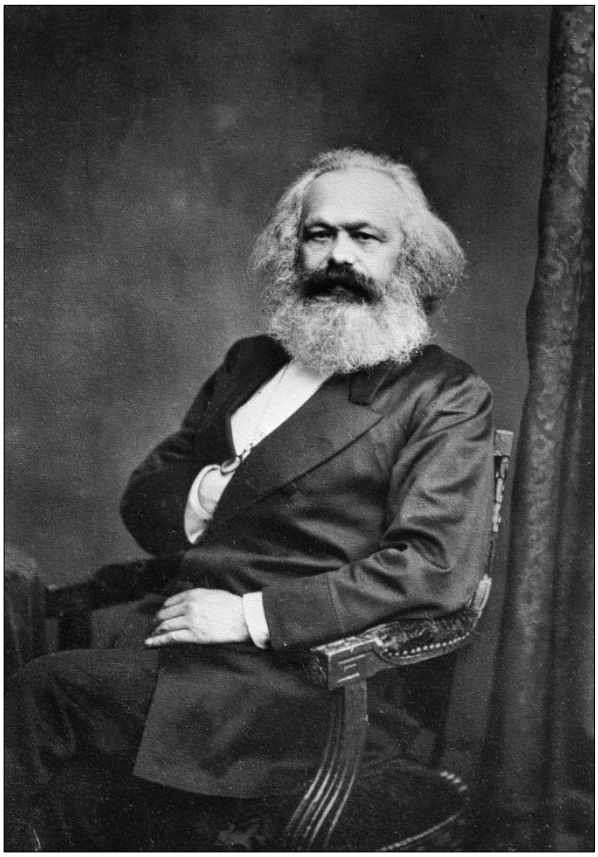
The family, during that period, lived under constant duress[86]. Marx would earn little money by writing for different newspapers from England, Germany, Austria, South Africa and the United States; yet it

[85] They lived in Soho, in the centre of London, at the time a poor working-class neighbourhood but which since then has been turned into a cultural high-price hub of the British capital. This process known as *gentrification* (from 'gentry', a word that referred to little nobility) consists in renovating a urban area in order to create an influx of richer inhabitants. The rent prices will inflate, pushing the poorer people out the area.

[86] During that period, one of Jenny's cousins, who had become a conservative Minister in the Prussian government, supported them by sending some money. Engels was also of great help.

allowed him to gain a considerable audience. As of 1852, he became the European correspondent for the New-York Daily Tribune, at that time the most distributed newspaper in the US, with a progressive and anti-slavery stance[87]. But, in 1862, at the dawn of the US Civil War, the editorial board advocated for conciliation between the Union and the Confederacy, taking a stance that would leave slavery intact. Marx strongly disagreed, and therefore made the decision to withdraw.

In London, Marx used to work in the reading room of the British Museum; and in 1859, ten years after arriving in the city, he was ready to publish *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Meanwhile, in 1864, the first *International Workingmen's Association* was founded, in which Marx took several responsibilities.



Karl Marx around 1875.

But it would take him another ten years to achieve, in 1867, the first of the three volumes of his major work, ***Das Kapital***, a thorough inquiry into political economic sciences. Marx had created his own theory of labour value, and invented the concepts of surplus value, alienation and class struggle, all of which have since then been used by every generation of economists, but also historians, sociologists, philosophers, and of course revolutionaries. At the time, the book was a small success, and Marx would continue to work on the two other volumes until his death.

In 1881, his wife Jenny died, and, in the wake of her death, Marx would develop a lasting catarrh that eventually led to bronchitis. He died on the 14th of March 1883, aged 64. He was buried, with little attendance at the funeral, in Highgate Cemetery in London.

His old friend Engels would ensure the publication of the last two volumes of *Das Kapital*, in 1885 and 1894. All the books and articles written by Marx and censored by the government of Prussia or others would eventually be published over the next 50 years.

[87] The United States offered other publishing opportunities for Marx. In 1852, he published in *Die Revolution*, a German magazine published in New York City, his work entitled *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, in which Marx analysed the French coup of 1851 when Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte assumed dictatorship.

Historical Materialism

To understand how Modern philosophy has evolved, it will be useful to take a historical look, by continuing from where we left off with Descartes and Kant, make our way through Hegel and Feuerbach, until we arrive to Marx's positions.

Let us begin with an example: the concept of God. For Descartes, the existence of God was a logical necessity: since I can conceive of God, the perfect being, without being perfect myself, it follows that this concept could not originate from me, but only from the perfect being itself. It meant that the idea of God was innate, and that God's existence preceded mine. Kant had a different view: he wrote that, as a consequence of his critique of pure reason, it is not within the power of human reason to determine if God exists or not. But while the ideas of the Enlightenment were progressing all over Europe and North America, and while the clerical powers were losing ground everywhere – and with them, the legitimacy of kings and emperors –, the question of God's existence was at stake along with everything that this idea had justified until then.

G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831 CE) would attempt the ultimate synthesis, by asking the following question: how is God real to us (and not only an abstract idea)? He answered that God, the concept of infinity, had to become finite, for us to be able to conceive it as infinity; in other words, that it is out of absolute necessity that God created the world, which is finite, in order to reveal himself as God. The world, then, appears as the antithesis of God. Yet there is a last step to take in order to attain the final synthesis: through the cult, through humans' acknowledgement of God's existence, the world re-unites with God. So God is infinite, and is also concrete, because God is one with the world's existence and with the world's reunification with God[88].

The mistake of Descartes was to believe that God existed before human reason, which is impossible because God would still be then a pure abstraction, unconceivable as such; for God to be real, God necessarily undergoes the world's creation and the world's reunification with the Idea. As it appears from this development, the concept of God is now tied to human reason: for to think what is infinite, while we are finite, the only possibility is to include in the idea of infinity the negation of infinity by itself.

Hegel's aim was to understand the development of human reason throughout this **historical** process, at the end of which reason meets with infinity.

Let us remember now that for Kant, human reason shares fundamental properties with the phenomena: they share common conditions of possibility, which enables reason to know – transcendentally – the phenomena. Hegel's critique of Kant's system was that it was too static and too formal. It did not allow for the study of how human reason had developed itself and continues to do so. Therefore, he opposed Kant's dualism, saying that

[88] This allowed Hegel to propose an interpretation of the Holy Trinity: the Father is the pure Idea, infinite; the Son is the Idea incarnate in the finite world; the Holy Spirit is the Idea reunited with itself through the process of its evolution toward complete self-consciousness. Through the whole process, human consciousness moves closer and closer to infinity, freeing itself from its finitude.

what we know are not phenomena, but really are the things-in-themselves, as they exist ***now***. What we know is what there is, and the reality of the world that we know is the process of infinity becoming conscious of itself through its antithesis (the world) and synthesis (the reunification through religion, science, politics and philosophy).

Hegel was inspired by Heraclitus' unity of opposites when he created this new dialectic. 'Dialectic' doesn't refer here to Socrates' and Plato's argumentative method, but to the movement of reason itself in its relationship with reality. According to Hegel, reason always works through three movements: 1) **thesis** (affirmation), 2) **antithesis** (negation) and 3) **synthesis** (negation of the negation). Let us take another example, more ordinary than that of the existence of God. If we consider a beautiful painting, we could begin with 1) the affirmation that "paintings are works of beauty"; then 2) analyse several paintings and try to discover the conditions that drive us to appreciate them as beautiful or not; in order to 3) arrive at the synthesis that a painting is beautiful only in the mind's eye of someone who is able to consciously appreciate their own interpretation and the role of history therein. In this process, the second movement coincides with the reality of the picture: thanks to the understanding produced by reason, the picture acquires new potentialities, new values, and the picture itself is transformed. Hegel sees the movement of the mind as one with the movement of the world, and concludes that "the real is the rational, the rational is the real" [89]. Where Kant had to back away from certain ideas he thought unknowable, Hegel creates a system in which everything can be rational, because reason can become everything, freeing itself from its limits to increase its potential, and with it, that of the world.

We can now understand how, in Hegel's view, the mind (or reason, or spirit: *Geist*, in Hegel's vocabulary) exists within the historical process of developing and **freeing** itself, with each historical stage being but steps in the process of the development of the mind. The movement of history has its starting-point in the Idea – making Hegel's philosophy an idealism – and also its goal: the end of this process is for infinity to free itself, for the mind to be subjected only to itself. According to Hegel, there were three main historical stages: 1) oriental imperialism, an age of moral and political obscurantism, 2) Greek democracy, a phase of expansion of freedom but also of instability and demagogy, 3) Christian constitutional monarchy, when freedom was integrated within a government. Although in the modern State the mind would still be limited by other minds[90], it was for Hegel the best form of government, towards which every nation should try to progress.

Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872 CE), a disciple of Hegel, was also one of his first critics. According to Marx, Hegel had turned the development of history on its head by saying that everything originated in the *Geist*; what Feuerbach did was to put this development "back

[89] "Hence arises the effort to recognize in the temporal and transient the substance, which is immanent, and the eternal, which is present. The rational is synonymous with the idea, because in realizing itself it passes into external existence." in G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, Queen's University Canada, 1896, Preface xxvii-xxviii.

[90] For Hegel, the aim is true reciprocity, in a process named *intersubjectivity*: self-consciousness of someone can only really be self-consciousness when it has accepted to be self-consciousness for the self-consciousness of another.

on its feet," by transposing Hegel's philosophy within a materialist and non-religious perspective. He posited that 'God' is nothing more than the outward projection of humans' inner nature. According to Feuerbach, humans have projected into the figure of God all their "good" aspirations and qualities, and their desire for absolute freedom. In his view, it was precisely what Hegel's philosophy had come to reveal: that it was reason which conceived of infinity – that *infinity* was in fact a stage in the development of the reason –, therefore making the figure of God empty, obsolete.

Marx went further. He transposed Hegel's dialectics in materialist terms. He said that Hegel's starting-point was a mystification, which obscured human capacity to understand how our physical actions reshape the world. The starting-point, said Marx, should not be the development of reason, but the development of the material conditions of human life. This, in turn, would allow us to understand the developments of the mind, of the ideas and of every cultural production that different human societies throughout history have invented, believed in, used in order to rule and prosper (and among them, the idea of God, as just another expression of human nature).

Historical materialism was born: a materialist conception of history, which was needed to attain scientific knowledge and an objective evaluation of the developments of our consciousness, based upon their physical and social fundaments.

*

To conclude this trajectory in the history of ideas, let us underline the importance of Hegel's thought for the sciences in general. By reintroducing the becoming in philosophy, he made possible, for example, Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection, as presented in his book *On the Origin of the Species*, published in 1859.

Hegel was also a defender of the idea of Progress: he believed that human societies are always developing toward something better, i.e. toward more freedom of the spirit. But did he not overlook himself in the process? It seems quite an instinctive behaviour, for a living being, to think that tomorrow will be better than today, that Progress exists objectively and that we are contributing to make it happen…

This critique must also be addressed to Marx. When he stated that the study of historical materialism was the only scientific basis for the understanding of the development of ideas, his own philosophical position, since it was by definition included in the said process, was at odds with itself.

We need then to ask ourselves if, just like Hegel's idealism could be interpreted by his own dialectic to be but a moment in the development of the spirit, Marx's materialism could be but a stage in the development of the productive forces.

Productive Forces & Relations of Production

Historical materialism undertakes the analysis of human societies by differentiating the specific forces that determine the formation of the economy, seen as the basis of any society's development. Therefore, Marx's project is not a philosophy for the individual; in particular, his project is not a moral one, which would give us indications about how to behave, etc. He aimed at understanding how individuals are moved by bigger forces, i.e. **social forces**. So, in Marx's view, every individual as a person is relatively unimportant, because the forces at stake will have their say anyway[91].

What are these forces? They are the productive forces (or forces of production) on the one hand, always in movement, always evolving towards more power; and the relations of production on the other hand, which organise the productive forces for the benefit of human life, stage after stage. Productive forces are dynamic/growing, while relations of production are somewhat static, as they rein in the growth of the productive forces by organising them. Let us enter into more detail.

I. **'Productive forces'** refers to the combination of **labour power** and **means of production**.

→ Labour power[92] is the capacity to do work and has existed in every human society.

> Marx's definition: "By labour-power or capacity for labour is to be understood the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being, which he exercises whenever he produces a use-value of any description."
> (*Capital*, Vol. 1, Ch. 6)
>
> Labour power is therefore impacted by any variation in the human population, both quantitative and qualitative (reproduction, wars, epidemics, nutrition, health care, use of medicines, of drugs, education, etc.). It includes the division of labour, i.e. the way tasks are separated so that individuals can acquire a higher degree of knowledge and efficiency in one specific activity (= specialization).
>
> For most of humanity's history, both the labour power and the means of production had changed very little and at a very slow pace – with the exception of wars and epidemics – when compared to how much it has changed from 1760 until today. At the beginning of the 19th century, the world population was just over 1 billion; in 2022, it reached 8 billion.

[91] This can be accounted as one of his philosophy's weaknesses, since a number of capitalism's reforms happened because of the cunning of individuals, e.g. the invention of the retirement system by Bismarck, or Ford's idea to pay his employees a wage that would be sufficient for them to buy one of the cars they worked at producing. Following that critique, we could say that Marx also bypassed the question of moral judgements, overlooking them as mere statistical effects.

[92] 'Labour power' is different from 'labour force' or 'workforce', i.e. the labour pool effectively in employment.

→ Means of production include land, materials (raw or transformed), technologies (any kind of tool or machinery, from ploughs to computers) and all types of facilities.

The resources used by humankind have seen profound changes over the last two centuries, first with fossil fuels (coal, petroleum and natural gas), then with the invention of nuclear technology. But that's just one small part of all the old and new materials the industry of the 20th and the 21st centuries put to use (e.g. minerals, silicate and rare earth, tropical forests, lands, plants, cattle, etc.). In that process, the importance of the development of chemistry cannot be understated.

Technologies have evolved drastically as well during the same period, either directly related to production (e.g. machinery, computers, etc.), or communication (e.g. telegraph, print, telephone, internet, satellites, etc.), transportation (e.g. railways, cars, cargo ships, tankers, planes, rockets, etc.) and distribution (e.g. postal services, retail, the invention of the supermarket c. 1930 in the USA, etc.). But what are technologies, if not knowledge? How are knowledges accessible, or "owned"?

Money is also considered as a mean of production, although physical money is but the tip of the iceberg of the monetary values in circulation inside capitalist societies. The word 'capital' itself refers, in common language, to all the means of production in general (= ownership of a capital of machinery, of buildings, etc.). Yet economists today differentiate between already produced means (= 'capital goods') and the wealth that results from the circulation process (= 'financial capital').

→ Natural conditions (climate and resources) can be considered as a third element.

With the exception of droughts and other natural catastrophes, the natural conditions have remained relatively stable until the second half of the 20th century, and therefore were not as important a factor to consider as labour power and means of production. Yet, many activities always had to align themselves on the cycle of the seasons (agriculture, construction, etc.).

As of today, the consequences of humans' direct and indirect destruction of ecosystems and impact on Earth's geology and climate (leading to a massive fall in biodiversity, desertification, spoiled resources and massive migrations) are to be taken into account at every step. Since natural resources are finite (from fossil fuels to drinkable water), these transformations have and will have more and more determining effects on the world's economies and politics.

II. Relations of production refers to all the relations that organise the productive forces, therefore making human life possible, creating order projected through time.

These relations are, by definition, social: for example the relation between freemen and their slaves during Antiquity, or between aristocrats and their serfs in feudal times, or between employers and their employees during the capitalist era.

According to Marx and Engels, relations of production have been characterized by **domination** of one or several groups over one or several others. Who are the decision-

makers? Who possesses what? Who has the legitimacy to rule and to create laws? Who are the depositories of art and culture?

Inside these macro-relations of political and economic power, the concept of social relations of production also encompasses every kind of micro-relation within a society at large: between groups determined by their gender, or ethnicity, or qualifications, or specialisations, etc.—while a 'society' is defined as the sum of all social relationships connecting its members.

Forces of production (dynamic/growing) and relations of production (static/organising) therefore always cohabit, yet are always in contradiction with one another[93]. The momentary equilibriums they form together – when they "fit" – are called **modes of production**. A mode of production can last for millennia or centuries; in theory, it will last as long as the relations fit the forces. Marx analysed several of them, which took place chronologically as follows: tribal mode, antic mode, feudal mode, capitalist mode; and in a foreseen future: communist mode.

Relations of production could be compared to the clothes of a child: at first well adapted, they would become too small when the child would grow up. In the same way, relations of production that were at first well adapted to a certain degree of development of the productive forces would eventually become too small, un-adapted, un-fitting, which would result in a series of **conflicts**.

→ As a result, society would enter a period of **crisis**, which can have two outcomes:

1) A massive **destruction** of productive forces, which allows for maintaining the same relations of production. This is what happens every now and then in the capitalist economy: an "epidemic" of overproduction leads to an economic crisis, which will be "resolved" by several bankruptcies and dismantlement of industries, causing massive unemployment. The Great Depression of 1929, or the subprime crisis of 2008, illustrate this type of process. It is usually the occasion for the surviving capitalists to buy the fallen banks, industries and companies, leading to a growing concentration of capital in the hands of a fewer number of individuals.

2) A **revolution** through which the productive forces in excess will bring a transformation of the relations of production. 'Revolution' is nothing romantic or heroic here: it is the concept of social change, the concept for the destruction of the old and the creation of the new. It is what happened in 1789: the productive forces had changed to such a degree that the feudal relations of production could not rein them in anymore; therefore, a crisis took place which successfully transformed into a revolution, bringing new relations of production, dominated by the bourgeoisie.

[93] Which is not without reminding us of Plato's Chariot allegory: the black horse is always pushing forward, pure desiring force, while the white horse listens to reason, whose task it is to rein in and guide the whole team.

Bourgeois, Proletarians, Revolutions

Under capitalism, **all the means of production are owned by the bourgeoisie, while the workers have no other choice but to sell their labour power in exchange of a wage**. Capitalist relations of production are, for Marx, relations of domination and oppression.

> In the early 19th century, the immense majority of the workers, although they worked between 12 and 14 hours per day, could barely survive with the wage they were paid. The crisis and depressions of early capitalism were leaving so many people unemployed and starving that the resulting revolts were violent, and the repression even more so. The *oppressive* character of capitalism's relations of production appeared then much more striking than it does in today's richest countries. Yet, oppressive work conditions do not only exist in today's poorest countries: unqualified and/or migrant workers are severely exploited in several European countries (e.g. seasonal workers in southern Spain or Italy). Moreover, lasting inequalities still prevail in every country of the world, based on gender (a consequence of the bourgeoisie's patriarchal division of labour), on nationality (a consequence of imperialism and colonialism), on ethnicity, on political orientation, etc.

The bourgeois (= capitalists, owners) are described as the oppressors, whose **aim** is profit, which allows them to accumulate (= capitalize) more and more means of production. It is this quest for profit that results in the exploitation of the workforce and in the cycles of accumulation/destruction/concentration.

> As it prospers, the bourgeoisie will experience political advancement. More and more individuals from that class will hold important positions in governments, institutions, etc. where their aim will be to protect the interests of their class. The ruling class will also secure a privileged access to high education, health care, etc.
>
> The political law that is at the basis of capitalism is the one protecting **private property**. Therefore, it is only natural that the bourgeois who participate in the government would work at making this law all the stronger. In feudal times, the land was the property of the local lord and he was the one responsible for its defence; in capitalist times, land is the property of the capitalist owners, but they don't protect it themself: the State ensures the protection of private property, through the action of several institutions (tribunals, police forces and armies[94]).

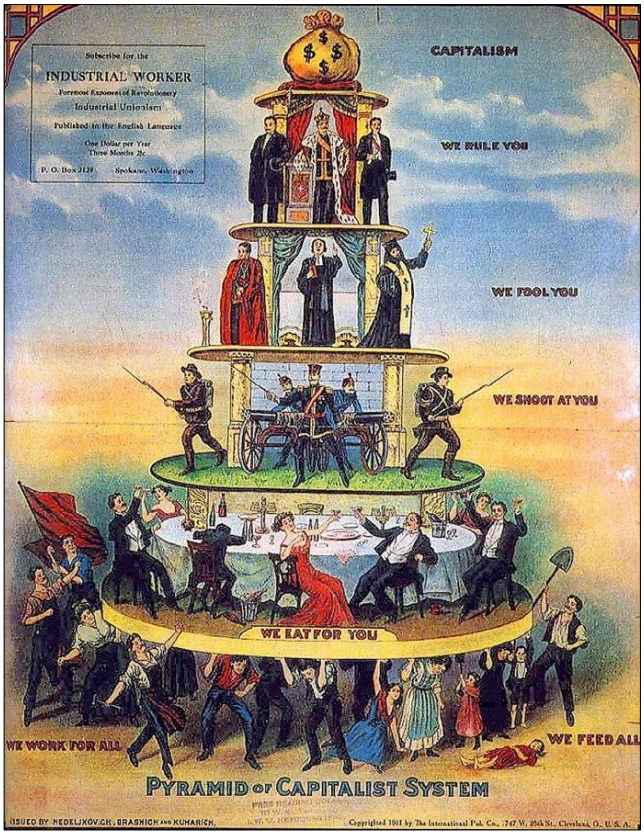
The proletarians (= workers, have-nots) are the oppressed, the exploited. They are like slaves, says the *Communist Manifesto*, not owned by one person, but at the mercy of all the capitalist class, to whom they have no choice but to sell their workforce.

> The common condition of all workers is what Marx called their alienation. In order to live, they must find an employer willing to hire them. Since the employers are the ones who decide upon the conditions of employment, the workers have to comply to the ruling class demands and sell themselves as if they were commodities. When they are employed, they have to obey, while the product of their work will never belong to them but always to the capitalists who owns the means of production.

[94] The modern State holds the monopoly on the right to violence (cf. Max Weber). However, contemporary societies are witnessing a growing number of private contractors in this field, for the security interests of private corporations.

> Competition between workers is therefore promoted by the capital owners. Competition creates tensions among workers, inside one company, one sector, one nation, and between nations, that benefit the bourgeoisie's project of accumulation. Means of population control (passports, visas, work permits, etc.), invented in the first half of the 20th century, perpetuate and solidify these antagonisms.

The communist party therefore was seen by Engels and Marx as an instrument of class-consciousness: by gathering, the workers would realise that their living conditions are all the same, and therefore they would become conscious of themselves not as separate individuals in competition with each other, but as a class, a social force. The party would become their instrument for bringing an economic and political revolution, i.e. to free themselves. But such a process would have to happen at a global level.



A 1911 *Industrial Worker* (IWW newspaper) publication advocating industrial unionism that shows the critique of capitalism.

Indeed, the bourgeoisie had grown to become a transnational power, using to its advantage new means of production, transportation, distribution and communication to conquer new markets; using also the armies of their national States to force closed markets to "open" and lead "barbarian" populations to "civilisation", i.e. to capitalism (imperialism & colonialism). As a consequence, the revolution would have to take place all around the world as well, with the proletarians developing into a world-class.

Hence the conclusion of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*: "**Workers of All Countries, Unite!"** Hence also the creation in 1864 of the first *International Workingmen's Association*. Marx was part of its General Council from its inception, and through it he would support the Paris Commune in 1871. But divergences arose inside the *International*, upon whether communists should take part in parliamentary elections in their different States, or concentrate on direct economic struggle against capitalism (which was the position of anarcho-communism). The First International would be dissolved in

1877, but in the next decades several other important international workers' associations would be created. They evolved in various ways until today[95].

What was Marx's vision of the proletariat revolution? He was overall very careful on this topic, for one reason: only when the revolution would have taken place could he, through the study of the new dynamics of productive forces then effective, be able to make conclusions over the new relations of production able to create better conditions for all workers. Marx concluded this would take place, but he did not forecast it.

However, Marx has drawn some basic outlines of how it would begin. 1) The working class would seize the means of production, which therefore would not belong to individuals anymore but to the whole society. Another step would be then to align global production on use-value[96], in order to break the capitalist cycles of overproduction and destruction. 2) A higher phase of the proletariat revolution would come eventually. It would be then possible to organise society according to the maxim: "From each according to their capacities, to each according to their needs".

Yet, the revolution of the proletariat did not happen during Marx's lifetime. Did it happen in 1917, i.e. was what happened in Russia in 1917 the proletariat revolution that Marx had envisioned? And can we disqualify Marx's theories altogether because of the failure of the USSR? Of course not, since Marx was dead since 40 years, and since Lenin and later Stalin invented their own political theory and agenda. It is more interesting to use Marx's theories to explain why and how this failure happened. Altogether, we should not be too hasty in reducing social events to theory.

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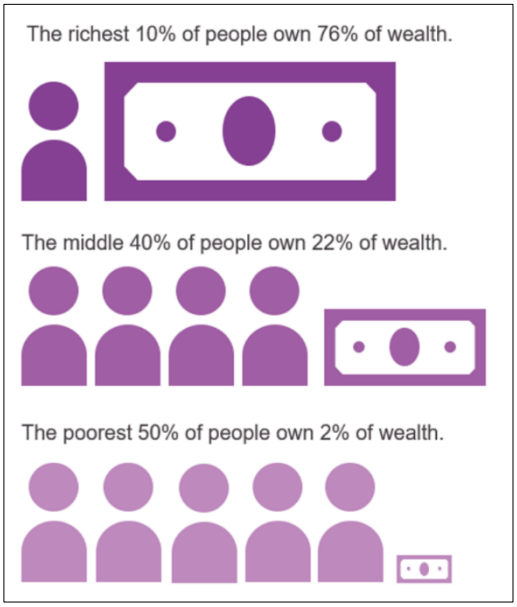
[95] In 1848, 1871, 1877 or 1917, many different movements of workers emerged and developed in different direction, each trying to come to terms with the capitalist ruling class. The ideas, demands and strategies of these different groups were sometimes very different from one another, which resulted in scissions. Therefore, we should be aware that 'socialism', 'communism', 'anarchism', 'syndicalism', are but generic names we use today to talk about movements which were and are very diverse and need to be contextualized.

[96] In his *Law of value*, Marx differentiates between use value, labor value and exchange value. Use value is the value that is determined by the utility of a commodity (food for example, which is utterly necessary to humans, should be altogether affordable). Labor value is the value that is determined by the labour time that was necessary to produce a commodity. Exchange value only exists on a market, where it represents the quantity of another commodity it will exchange for; exchange value therefore is determined by the commodification process, which is dictated by its marketization (a process influenced not only by economic factors, but also technical, political and cultural factors, insofar as it involves property rights, claims to access to resources, etc.).

To conclude this chapter, let us take a look at some of the **developments of the capitalist mode** of production which are partly the consequences of Marx's ideas:

- The struggles of various workers' syndicates, associations and parties – through strikes, protests and democratic activities – have driven the ruling class to accept many of their demands (diminution of the working hours, salary increase, introduction of a minimum wage, social insurances, etc.). This wouldn't have been possible without class consciousness.
- After the Second World War, the creation of the Welfare State (also known as the Social State in Switzerland) was a game-changer. It created such work conditions that many workers today can live decently. However, two questions remain: 1) of all the workers who cannot live decently, outside the secluded boundaries of the richest nations. On a global scale, social inequalities have risen considerably over the last decades. 2) Of the legitimacy, meaning and future of a system based upon private property, continuous growth and profit.



Source: Development Initiatives based on World Inequality Lab, 2021; World Inequality Report 2022.

- Consumerism created an important change in the way workers would refer to themselves, not as 'proletarians' but as 'middle class'. Although their purchasing power largely depends upon the exploitation of workers in other countries (e.g. products made in China, Bangladesh, etc.), the middle-class lives with the impression that they are *owners*, while never owning the means of production. The crisis of 2008 highlighted how this illusion had been further built through the mortgage system, which ultimately profited the most powerful banks, creating stronger concentrations of capital in fewer hands.

What about the future? The productive forces have been constantly growing since the beginning of the industrial revolution, and still are, at a very fast pace. One of the questions that loom over the future is: will the productive forces stabilize at one point? The world population growth? The breakthroughs in medicine and technology? And what will happen then? It is also worth noticing that the Big Tech companies (Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Meta and Microsoft in the USA, and Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent, and Xiaomi in China) have consolidated market dominance in the last decade and behave, according to some economists, in a way that is closer to **techno-feudalism** than strictly speaking capitalism (cf. Yannis Varoufakis). Marx foresaw the advent of communism and for now history hasn't proved him right—quite the contrary. Yet other economic systems are possible in the future, which could take into account the necessity for a circular economy, and a shift away from the imperative of capitalist growth.

Indeed, the project of Modernity – which started with the Renaissance banking system, and Descartes' words "as master and possessor of nature" – has triggered the humanmade destruction of our own natural habitat, through the infinite exploitation of finite resources. Let us remember that climate change has just begun.

Infrastructure, Superstructure, Ideology

Marx invented a new science, historical materialism, to understand the evolution of human societies; but his project was also to understand how our ideas and representations are a consequence of the social relations of production we live in.

He described the organisation of the productive forces as shaping two complementary fields: the **infrastructure** (schools, factories, housing, roads, land, prisons, etc.) and the **superstructure** (political institutions, laws, religion, morality, art, etc.). To use an analogy, we could say that infrastructure is like the 'hardware,' while superstructure is like the 'software' of a society. Marx wrote:

> In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.[97]

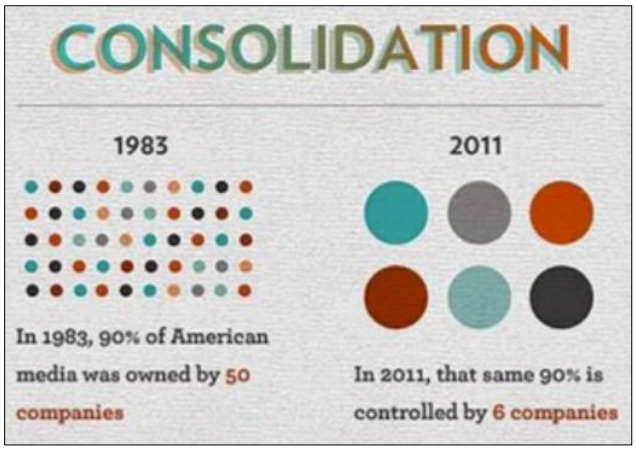
As we have seen earlier, the capitalist class rules over the political system, directly (through elected individuals) and indirectly (through lobbying, pressures, relocation, offshoring, etc.), ensuring the protection of private property and of its interests.

But capitalists also gained a foothold in everything **cultural**: the ownership of production companies for example enable them to influence the contents of movies, TV series, etc. Major publishing houses work the same way, and of course, the **mass media** do also (in 2011, 90% of the US media was controlled by 6 companies[98]; the same concentration process is observable in Europe). Capitalists are also very influential in the

[97] Marx, Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859).

[98] Ashley Lutz, "These 6 Corporations Control 90% Of The Media In America", *Business Insider*, 14.06.2012. URL: https://www.businessinsider.com/these-6-corporations-control-90-of-the-media-in-america-2012-6?IR=T

art world: they are the only ones able to buy expensive art pieces, therefore setting their price and determining which ones are the most 'artistic', 'important' or 'beautiful'.



Consolidation (concentration of ownership) in the media industry in the USA. As of 2022, the largest media conglomerates in terms of revenue are Comcast, The Walt Disney Company, Warner Bros. Discovery, and Paramount Global.

When Marx writes that "[i]t is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness", he takes a dynamic view on consciousness as being historically determined. The understanding of our own identity and purpose is subjected to social relations of power.

Feuerbach wrote that 'God' was but an outward projection of human nature. Marx took that idea further, saying that our subjectivity and beliefs are also projections. The name he gives to this ensemble of projected social images is ideology. Social images first exist in the language we use every day: how we name things, how we refer to people or situations, etc. Social images exist in every cultural production, on any medium, from smartphone applications to advertisement, from movies to TV shows, from press articles to government official communications. They have an impact on the formation of subjectivities (= how I understand who I am within a certain context) and of social relationships (= who I am relatively to other people, groups, models, etc.).

Ideology, according to Marx, is always the feature of the dominating class, and therefore always follows the lines that would prove the most profitable to this class.

The power of ideology resides in the fact that it is powered by intellectuals, celebrities, influencers, etc. but is then reverberated by potentially anyone. We can think of Plato's allegory of the cave, and say that the ideologues are the individuals behind the wall, the ones who put little figurines in front of the fire in order to project shadows before the people sitting down at the bottom, alienated. The people will begin to talk about what they see, argue if it's right or wrong, good or bad. Yet the people in the cave have no idea of the infrastructure in which they sit: the cave, i.e. a manifestation of the social relations of production that organise their very lives. So how could they understand the real motives behind the shadows, the intentions behind the ideology?

Religion is the Opium of the People

Along the same lines, Marx understood **religion** as a human creation, determined by social relations of production. One of Marx's quote on that topic has remained famous: **religion is the opium of the people**. For him, religion is nothing else than ideology and a form of alienation. This is why it should be abolished:

> The foundation of irreligious criticism is: Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again. But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man – state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. […]
>
> Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people.
>
> The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is the demand for their *real* happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to *give up a condition that requires illusions*. The criticism of religion is, therefore, *in embryo*, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the *halo*.
>
> Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers on the chain not in order that man shall continue to bear that chain without fantasy or consolation, but so that he shall throw off the chain and pluck the living flower. The criticism of religion disillusions man, so that he will think, act, and fashion his reality like a man who has discarded his illusions and regained his senses, so that he will move around himself as his own true Sun. Religion is only the illusory Sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself.[99]

Marx is not attacking individuals, but an institution (the Church) and an ideology (which produces an illusion for people to accept their chains). We can read in this passage his sensitivity to the suffering of the people, and his refusal to allow this suffering to be held captive by an illusion. What we need to do, in his view, is get people to look at the real, material causes of their suffering; and from there, try to make their living conditions better, and more free.

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[99] Marx, *Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, 1844.

CHAPTER 12

Friedrich Nietzsche

Life of an Untimely Man

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) was born in town near Leipzig, Röcken, where his father was a Lutheran pastor. Yet after his father died from brain disease in 1849, the family relocated to Naumburg, where he grew up with his younger sister Elisabeth, his mother, his grandmother, and two aunts. From an early age, he began playing music, and would be an amateur composer during all his life, for voice, piano and violin.

In 1864, after graduating, Nietzsche began studying theology and classical philology at the University of Bonn, with the intention of becoming a minister. Yet after one semester, he lost his faith and consequently put a stop to his theological studies. A reader of Feuerbach, who wrote that humans created God and not the other way around, Nietzsche was also influenced by the rise of materialist philosophy.

The young Nietzsche would then meet a brilliant school and university career, culminating in 1869 when he was chosen to teach classical philology[100] at the University of Basel. At 24, he was the youngest ever appointed to that chair. Though most of Nietzsche's university work and early publications were in philology, he was already interested in philosophy, particularly the work of Arthur Schopenhauer. It was around this time also that he met Richard Wagner, the German composer, who would become a friend, later a foe, when Wagner became a German nationalist.

The young Nietzsche.

In 1872, Nietzsche published his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*. His colleagues in philology expressed scepticism for this work in which Nietzsche left the classical philologic method in favour of a more philosophical approach, supported by a lively and poetic writing style.

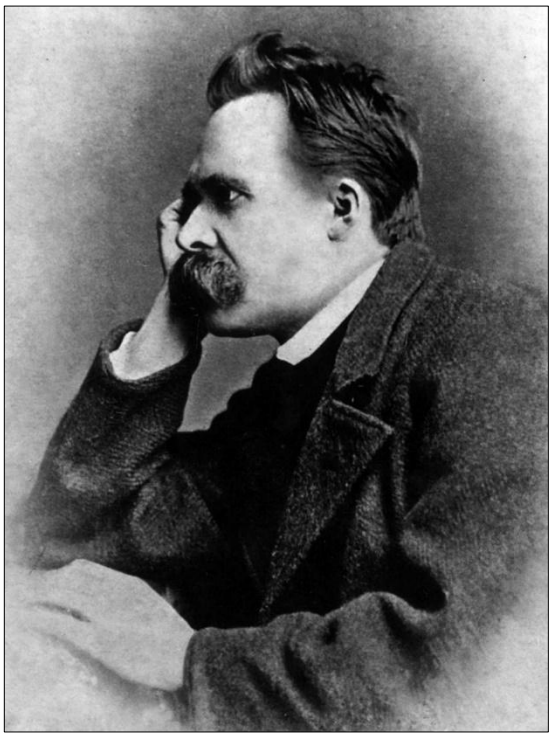
He published several books in the following years (*On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* in 1873, *Untimely Meditations* in 1876, *Human, All Too Human* in 1878) touching many subjects, from metaphysics to morality and religion, also remarkable for the change of style of Nietzsche, and the reaction he manifested against the pessimistic philosophy of

[100] From Ancient Greek φιλολογία (*philología*, 'love of word'), philology is the study of language in oral and written historical sources. It comprises textual and literary criticism, history, and linguistics with strong ties to etymology.

Schopenhauer. But even while writing *Human, All Too Human*, the illness that seemed to have taken his father struck him with full force: unbearable migraines that left him almost blind, bouts of paralysis... Fortunately, one of his close friends, Heinrich Köselitz[101], helped him to put his thoughts down on paper. Nietzsche wrote about this in *Ecce Homo*, his autobiographical work: "I dictated, my head aching and surrounded by compresses, he wrote and corrected as well—he was, in fact, the real writer, while I was only the author." In this book, Nietzsche acknowledges the refutation of metaphysics, i.e. the fact that ultimate realities are not knowable to us. From there, he begins a revaluation of all notions: truth, reason, beauty, altruism—what are these concepts if there is nothing to ground them? Are they human projections? Inventions? What does that say *about us*?

But in 1879, Nietzsche's health declined significantly, and he had to resign his position at Basel. Since his childhood, he suffered from various illnesses which prove at times very disruptive, including moments of shortsightedness that left him nearly blind, migraine headaches, and violent indigestion (some historians suppose that he developed a brain tumour, maybe the same illness that killed his father, others that he had contracted syphilis while serving in the German army some years earlier). At one point, his condition made regular work impossible, and he was therefore pensioned.

Between 1879 and 1888, Nietzsche would live on that pension and a little aid he received from a few faithful friends. What began then was also **a life of travels**, led in order to find climates better suited to his physical condition. He spent many summers in the village of Sils Maria, near St. Moritz in Switzerland, and many of his winters in the Italian cities of Genoa, Rapallo, and Turin and the French city of Nice.



Nietzsche in 1882.

This wandering life can be seen in his works from this period, which took an affirmative turn. In *Dawn* (1881) and *The Gay Science* (1882), Nietzsche explores routes leading to mental freedom and self-affirmation. Here is an extract of *The Gay science*: "I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who makes things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse. Looking away shall be my only negation. And all in all and on the whole: some day I wish to be only a Yes-sayer." (§276) **Amor fati** is a Latin expression which

[101] Best known under the pseudonym Peter Gast.

means to love one's fate, whatever could happen. While applying this maxim to his own life, Nietzsche would in parallel combat every type of alienation (psychological, cultural or metaphysical) that he met, inviting his readers to become free spirits.

Between 1883 and 1885, he published in four volumes his book that is probably the most famous today, *Thus Spoke Zarathoustra*. His writing style is literary, poetic, even religious. Like Plato who used myths to convey ideas, Nietzsche used parables to create meaning through figurative speech. With the risk of making interpretation more difficult and slippery. The book also contains an idea that will be very successful and also highly controversial, that of the Übermensch (the superhuman), a figure of the great affirmation of life and liberation from herd morality. The figure of the superhuman was, for example, appropriated by the Nazis, who claimed to be the "superior race" — the very opposite of what Nietzsche had meant (Nietzsche strongly opposed the German nationalism of his time and the rise of anti-Semitism).

Over the following years, he continued to write, but in an increasingly acute and trying solitude. *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), *The Case of Wagner* (1888), *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), *The Antichrist* (1888), *Ecce Homo* (1888) and *Nietzsche contra Wagner* (1888). Five books written in only one year point to the fact that something was going on; and indeed, that year Nietzsche's health got better and he was able to work to his heart's content. But it was like the calm before the storm. On 3rd of January 1889, Nietzsche suffered a mental breakdown.

The story goes that Nietzsche, while in Turin, came across a carriage whose driver was violently whipping the horse. Nietzsche approached the horse, put his arms around its neck to protect it, tears in his eyes, forbidding anyone to approach it. From this moment, his mental collapse was complete. For a few more days he retained the ability to speak, but sometimes thinking he was Dionysus, sometimes Christ, sometimes Napoleon, singing and talking incessantly, his lucidity had disappeared.

From 1889 onwards, Nietzsche remained aphasic, unable to communicate. Although in the years that followed his philosophical work began to be read and recognized, he was no longer "there." He was transferred from one clinic to another and, after suffering several heart attacks in 1898 and 1899, he died on the 25th of August, 1900, around noon.

From the late 19th century and through the whole 20th century, Nietzsche's work became hugely influential. From Sigmund Freud (the "father" of psychoanalysis) to the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, from writers like Thomas Mann and Herman Hesse to philosophers like Theodor Adorno and Martin Heidegger, everyone read Nietzsche. Other thinkers to have been influenced by Nietzsche would include Carl Gustave Jung, Jean-Paul Sartre, Oswald Spengler, Albert Camus, Ayn Rand, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault. We mentioned above how the Nazis tried to recuperate his work, yet the same can be said about liberal democrats, anarchists and libertarians.

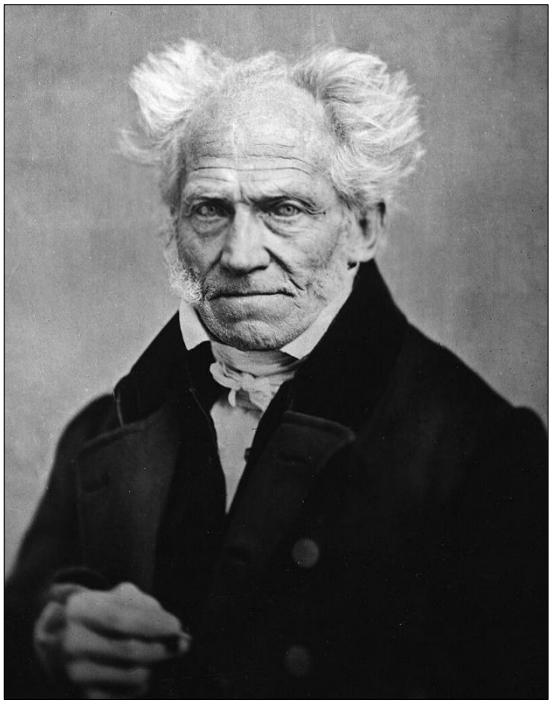
*

After discussing Schopenhauer and the question of pessimism, we will delve into the heart of Nietzsche's concerns: the advent of nihilism. A multifaceted event for the European psyche, nihilism will lead us to question the meaning of the expression “God is dead,” while emphasizing the problem of the will to truth, i.e. the human impulse to seek the truth. With this in mind, we will study Nietzsche's response to nihilism: his philosophy of the will to power, inspired by Dionysus, the figure of the great affirmation.

Schopenhauer and Pessimism

Arthur Schopenhauer was the philosopher whose work inspired Nietzsche when he was young. Thus, understanding Schopenhauer’s ideas will give us the bases to understand Nietzsche, and in particular why he turned away from his philosophy.

A reader of Kant, Schopenhauer (1788-1860 CE) came to a different conclusion: like Hegel – whom he hated – he thought that the thing-in-itself was not “unknowable” after all… As romanticism had begun to explore humans’ inner life, Schopenhauer thought that the thing-in-itself could be known through our psyche: more precisely, through our **will**. By itself, he said, our individual will is nothing; but as an access key, it has great value: it allows us to understand the whole fabric of the real – reality itself – as will.



Arthur Schopenhauer in 1859.

In his book *The World as Will and Representation*, first published in 1818, Schopenhauer wrote that all nature is the expression of **one and the same will to life**. This fundamental will took the place of Kant’s thing-in-itself, and the individual wills that of the phenomena. But the will to life is not a neutral concept. In Schopenhauer’s view, the will is insatiable, always urging towards the satisfaction of new desires, always craving for more. To the question: why does the will want? Schopenhauer answers: because it lacks. Humans’ appetites being expressions of this fundamental Will to life, Schopenhauer identified the latter as the cause of all suffering. Fragile, vulnerable, mortal creatures, human beings want to live, want to love and be loved, because they intimately feel a lack that will never be filled.

In a vision that Schopenhauer shares with Hinduism – a religion he studied through the sacred texts of ancient India – but also with Platonism, he identifies the tension of our incessant desires as being responsible for our misfortunes. The pleasure we derive when a

desire is satisfied eases the pain of lack, but only briefly, as other desires are immediately aroused. So **pain** is a continuous element of our experience as living beings. Whatever we do, our individual will is the expression of a deeper desire that never leaves us in peace.

Following this logic, if it is the same will that manifests itself through every individual will, then it is with itself that the Will conflicts through the egoisms of every living being. "The world is hell, and humans are in one respect its tormented souls and in another its devils."[102] From there comes Schopenhauer's **pessimism**: the Will to life uses us against one another in order to continue willing more. In Schopenhauer's mind, the way to fight back lies therefore with the negation of the will: since desires are the causes of suffering, annihilating them would eliminate the latter. Schopenhauer interprets any kind of lifestyle characterized by deprivation, abstinence or renunciation – what we call **asceticism** – as an attempt at negating the individual will, negation which would precipitate the consciousness of its unity with the fundamental Will.

On an ethical level, Schopenhauer advocates for **compassion**: with the knowledge that all beings are expressions of the same fundamental Will, we should go beyond the illusion of our differences and empathise with the suffering of others. Schopenhauer is also opposed to violence, between humans and against animals. He is also opposed to suicide: first because death would only be the end of one individual will and therefore wouldn't change anything overall; second because suicide appears as an affirmation of the individual will (the *desire* to put a stop to one's own suffering), which would produce more pain overall since this egoistic death would affect other people's lives. The only way toward less suffering – as taught by Hinduism and Buddhism[103] – is to negate our individual will.

Let's return now to Schopenhauer's starting point: his conception of the will to life, for it is precisely through a different interpretation of the will that Nietzsche will chart his own course. From a will to life characterized by its insatiability, its lack, Nietzsche shifted to the opposite position: the will to life **as overabundance, as excess**. It is still a will for more, but the direction and the meaning of it were changed. To the question: why does the will want? Nietzsche answers: because it grows, because it is too rich, because life continuously overflows itself.

With this new starting-point, Nietzsche **re-evaluates** every element of Schopenhauer's philosophy. Asceticism for example: far from a true negation of the individual will, Nietzsche sees it as an affirmation of the will against itself. Or compassion: not a way of negating the illusion of our differences, but a way of creating a communal link through suffering, an affirmation of that communality of the wills.

In Nietzsche's revaluation, Schopenhauer appeared as one of many philosophers who casted a negative judgement upon life. Life is imperfect, always changing and our body is a prison, said Socrates. Nietzsche points out that it's the same pessimism here and there:

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[102] Quoted and translated by Frederick C. Beiser, *Weltschmerz, Pessimism in German Philosophy 1860-1900*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2016, p. 46.

[103] Schopenhauer named his dog "Atman", the word used in Hinduism for one's true self. The path of the believer is to realize that one's true self is identical with the transcendent self called "Brahman".

Plato pitting deceptive appearances against true Ideas, Christianity with its moral judgments and contempt for the body, the rationalists and their distrust of sensory experience, Kant and his quest for pure reason, Schopenhauer and his pessimism towards the will to live. With his usual bite of irony, Nietzsche called it the *consensus sapientium*: the common agreement of so many 'wise' men who said that "life is no good."[104]

Let us mark that Nietzsche didn't say that the opposite stance (i.e. life is good) is *morally* superior, since his conclusion was that any moral judgement on life is but a production of life itself. As he wrote in *Twilight of the Idols*: "***there are no moral facts*** […] Morality is merely an **interpretation** of certain phenomena".

As we shall see, for Nietzsche, every form of life interprets the world around it according to what it is. The will to live - which Nietzsche calls the will to power - of each life form is what drives it to give its environment such and such meanings, because these meanings benefit its development, its growth. So, if someone – consciously or unconsciously[105] – judges a certain action to be morally "bad" or morally "good", it's because his or her will to life interprets this action as dangerous or, conversely, beneficial to his or her own development or that of the group to which he or she belongs.

Nihilism and the Will to Truth

Although Nietzsche admired it when he was young, Schopenhauer's philosophy gradually came to represent for him an illustration of his times' tendencies toward more pessimistic views. He saw the 19th century as a period of decline, of ***décadence***[106]. Periods such as this would occur in the life cycle of every culture, just as it had happened in classical Greece, at the time of Socrates. Every decline is specific to the cultural cycle it is ending. Nietzsche thought that the *décadence* he witnessed and to which he himself belonged – the *décadence* of the Platonist-Christian worldview –, came with a specific result: nihilism, of which he tried to understand the nature and consequences.

Nihilism is a process that can be understood on two levels: a cultural one and a philosophical one. We are going to see how, first, the Platonist-Christian values lost their value (→they lost their capacity to shape the instincts into efficient syntheses); second, how they cast a dying look on themselves (→the instincts, still shaped by the dying culture's syntheses, now turn against themselves in a destructive way).

1) Nihilism (from the Latin *nihil*, 'nothing') is first understood as a condition in which all values lose their value. To say of a society that it is nihilist hence doesn't mean that this society has no values anymore, but that it experiences a loss, a degradation. What is a value? Anything to which we can ascribe the word 'good'. Nihilism is therefore the condition in which a society becomes unsure about what is 'good'. This loss in the value of

[104] Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, II, 1. Trans. by Duncan Large.
[105] Interpretation is mostly an unconscious process, cf. The Gay Science, III, §128.
[106] Nietzsche used the French word in his writings.

values has direct consequences on humans' institutions: everything that these values permitted and forbade, all that they justified and explained, now looks unsure and dubious. In that first sense, nihilism is a quasi-synonym of *décadence*.

Nietzsche thought that the worldview that had dominated Europe for 2000 years was coming to an end. We can recall some of the events that precipitated this process. In the 16th century, the Protestant Reform brought a separation between faith and religion: one could believe in God and read the Bible without being part of the Roman Church anymore. It created the basis for a more individualized relationship with God, and weakened the Christian Catholic religion as an institution—this same institution which had for centuries anointed kings and given them the legitimacy to rule. The Copernican revolution would also be a powerful blow: the Earth was not at the centre of the universe; as would the discovery that the Earth is indeed a sphere. The representations of old were obsolete. Although Christianity adapted to these new features of the known world, throughout the 17th and 18th centuries the Enlightenment continually eroded Christian beliefs and fostered interest for other cultures, weakening the certitudes people shared about Christian morals. Little by little, relativism (cf. Protagoras, chapter 4) entered in the minds of people who had been used to believing in the Christian God's commandments with absolute certainty and fear. While scientific rationality triumphed over Christian dogmas, the *meaning of life* was shaken and a stronger pessimism arose: the feeling that nothing matters, and that following a moral code or not doesn't make any difference.

For Nietzsche, all the upheavals, inventions, revolutions and counter-revolutions that took place at this time were symptoms of a decline, and that something was profoundly changing in human societies and that change was inevitable.

2) Nihilism is understood secondly as the specific outcome of this worldview that is coming to an end. According to Nietzsche, the entire Platonic-Christian era was built around the will to truth. So how does "truth" lose its value? Firstly, because other values gain in importance (e.g. wealth, efficiency, progress, novelty, power, etc.), and secondly, because the will to truth eventually turns in on itself and seeks the truth of... the will to truth. In the field of knowledge, this process leads to the self-negation of the will, i.e. to pessimism (with ideas such as "nothing can really be known", "everyone is right", etc.).

Starting the 17th century, philosophers attempted to find absolute foundations for the development of the sciences, to no abiding result. It was only natural then for their truth-seeking instinct to question itself: is there any truth in our desire to look for the truth? Is it possible to find such a thing as the truth? Or is "the truth," after all, a human invention? Just like Feuerbach said that "God" was a human invention?

If truth has never existed outside the human mind, if it has always been a creation of the mind, what does that say about us? Why did humans invent it? Does that mean philosophers have been searching for centuries for something that does not exist? And if we know all this and continue to search for "the truth" without taking into account that it is our creation, then aren't we nihilists? The same would apply to a society built on the concept of truth...

By extension, the concept of nihilism could apply to any culture whose foundations and objectives are "imaginary causes" and "unattainable goals." This does not mean that these theories and utopias have no effect[107]. But it does mean that any claim made in this way would be a form of falsehood, and therefore something to be overcome by the will to live in its ever-overflowing force.

Having taken up Heraclitus' concept of *becoming*, understanding life as φύσις (cf. chapter 2), that is, as nature and development, Nietzsche also believed that nihilism could be interpreted as a moment in a cycle, and he constantly returned to the idea that nihilism might – perhaps – come to an end. The only way to act, therefore, would be to move forward and see its development through to its conclusion.

> […] we *have* to go forwards, i.e. *step by step further in* décadence (—this being *my* definition of modern 'progress'…). You can *check* this development and, by checking it, dam up, accumulate degeneration itself, making it more vehement and *sudden*: no more can be done.—[108]

If we tried to slow down the process, to hold it back, there would be only one result: degeneration would accumulate until it was released with even greater violence. This interpretation of Nietzsche is, of course, pessimistic. And yet, when we look at the world today, it seems to make sense: human societies are organized in such a way, and they move forward with such inertia, that a real change of course looks hard to imagine. No turning back seems possible, which effectively leaves us with only one possible path. Instincts will continue to deteriorate, no matter what we do, and among them, the truth-seeking instinct:

> After Christian truthfulness has drawn one conclusion after another, it finally draws its *strongest conclusion*, its conclusion *against* itself; this will occur when it asks the question: '*What is the meaning of all will to truth?*'… And here again I touch on my problem, on our problem, my *unknown* friends (—for as yet I *know* of no friend): what meaning would *our* whole being possess, if we were not those in whom this will to truth becomes conscious of itself as a *problem*?... There is no doubt that from now on morality will be *destroyed* through the coming to consciousness of the will to truth: this is the great drama in a hundred acts which is reserved for Europe over the next two centuries, the most fearful, most questionable and perhaps also most hopeful of all dramas… [109]

Was Nietzsche's prediction correct? Are we witnessing today, roughly 140 years after he wrote these words, the destruction of Platonist-Christian morality and the coming to consciousness of the will to truth as a problem? What are we afraid of, what do we question, and what do we hope for, then?

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[107] In his book *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche wrote that the Platonist-Christian worldview was at least beneficial in that it fostered the *individual human will*: even if it was through a will that negated itself, it gave will a meaning and gathered instinctual forces into that shape.
[108] *Twilight of the Idols*, IX, 43, "A Word in the Conservatives' Ear".
[109] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, III, 28. Trans. by Douglas Smith.

"God is dead"

We will now delve deeper into Nietzsche's understanding of the Platonist-Christian *décadence*, which the expression "God is dead" came to symbolize. And let us begin by clarifying two common misunderstandings about this expression. The first concerns its authorship: although Nietzsche used it several times (the most famous is in *Thus Spoke Zarathoustra*), he was not the one to invent it. The second concerns its importance: as far as the figure of 'God' is concerned, Nietzsche saw it as trifling, because what mattered to him was to understand the consequences and prepare for what would come next.

> God is dead; but given the way people are, there may still for millennia be caves in which they show his shadow.—And we—we must still defeat his shadow as well![110]

Let us take three steps back. Copernicus, Descartes, Galileo, Newton and so many other Modern scientists and philosophers had pushed towards a rationalisation of the idea of God, little by little reducing the value of Christian faith. Kant came to the conclusion that to prove the existence or inexistence of God was out of reach for the human mind. Thirty years later, **Feuerbach** wrote that God was nothing but an outward projection of humans' inner nature. Following the influences of romanticism and the growing pessimism of the times, many thinkers delved into that breach.

It was one of them, **Philipp Mainländer** (1841-1876 CE), who spoke for the first time about the death of God. In a book published in 1876 – that Nietzsche read – he wrote: "God has died and his death was the life of the world"[111]. For Mainländer, this sentence referred to his conclusion that the cosmic unity of all beings *had* existed, but was no longer a reality. 'God' *had* been the Being that brought all beings into existence as one. But, from this original unity, the world had transformed: beings had taken on a life of their own and the cosmos was now only made of their **multiplicity**. He reinterpreted the Christian myth accordingly: the Father had been the original unity, but then gave birth to the Son, the multiplicity, and with the birth of the Son, the Father died. Mainländer also reinterpreted Schopenhauer's concepts: the fundamental Will to life underlying all the individual wills was no more; after the death of God, only the multiplicity of individual wills existed. If there is no God to maintain the cosmic unity of the souls, a consequence would be that the death of the body would also mean the death of the soul.

The only outcome of life, according to Mainländer, is thus nothingness. Which he declares accepting as such, asserting that death – annihilation – is the only salvation. He then turns to Schopenhauer's concept of the individual will and reinterprets it accordingly as the instrument of an underlying **will to die**: any desire to live, he concludes, is merely a means of bringing about death, an expression of the will to die. After such assertions, it is hardly surprising that Mainländer, at the age of 34, suffered a mental breakdown in fits of megalomania and ended up hanging himself, using a pile of his own books as a stool.

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[110] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, III, §108. Trans. by Josefine Nauckhoff.
[111] Mainländer, *The Philosophy of Redemption*.

Nietzsche of course couldn't agree with Mainländer's conclusions, but he was altogether convinced by the fact that the death of God – of which Mainländer's complete pessimism was a symptom – was an important event in the life of European culture. For Nietzsche, the death of God didn't mean the death of the "Holy Father" figure, but rather the death of the Supreme Idea of the Good that had invented, the death of an abstraction which, through dogmatism, had ended up taking precedence over reality (see chapter 6, the two "places") — that is, the belief that a world where only "good" would exist is possible, where reality can be forced to become identical to "reason."

Nietzsche shares another idea with Mainländer: that the world is not "one" but multiple. He unmasks other figures of the disguised one God, writing that the world is neither "a living being" (an organic totality) nor a "machine" in the rationalist sense (a mechanical totality created by a Great Architect). He repeatedly criticizes these descriptions, calling them anthropomorphisms:

> But how could we reproach or praise the universe! […] it is neither perfect, nor beautiful, nor noble, nor does it want to become any of these things; in no way does it strive to imitate man! In no way do our aesthetic and moral judgements apply to it![112]

Nietzsche, close to Feuerbach in that respect, considered these conceptions of God or the universe to be external projections of humans' inner nature: a sublimation of their instincts. But then, what instincts are we talking about?

Christianity and the Herd instinct

In 1888, Nietzsche led his biggest offensive yet against the Christian religion, in a book entitled *The Antichrist*. Once again, he publicized his view that Christianity was built on shunning reality and falsifying causality:

> In Christianity neither morality nor religion comes in touch at all with reality. Nothing but imaginary *causes* (God, the soul, the ego, spirit, free will—or even non-free will); nothing but imaginary *effects* (sin, salvation, grace, punishment, forgiveness of sins). Imaginary beings are supposed to have intercourse (God, spirits, souls); imaginary Natural History (anthropocentric: total lack of the notion of "natural causes"); an imaginary *psychology* (nothing but misunderstandings of self, interpretations of pleasant or unpleasant general feelings; […] repentance, pangs of conscience, the temptation of the devil, the presence of God); an imaginary teleology (the Kingdom of God, the Last Judgment, Everlasting Life).[113]

In examining Christianity, Nietzsche concludes that our beliefs are rooted in our instincts, which determine what we hope for, desire, and fear. This also means that we do not stop believing in God simply because it has been proven that the existence or non-existence of God is unknowable; belief is woven into our instincts, we believe in God because we need to believe in God. Therefore, the fact that some free spirits can overcome the death of God does not mean that this is the case for everyone, nor for European culture

[112] *The Gay Science*, III, §109.
[113] Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, §15. Trans. by Antoni Ludovici.

as a whole. Indeed, today's societies rely on Christian values and conventions to build and justify their moral order. Every society needs a value system, and change happens slowly.

What instinct is involved in the development of morality? Nietzsche calls it the **gregarious instinct** (= living in a group, in a community) or the **herd instinct**. The need for humans to stay together is so strong that it has shaped this instinct, whose purpose is to maintain the cohesion and homogeneity of the group. Under these conditions, the needs of the group become the norm:

> Wherever we encounter a morality, we find an evaluation and ranking of human drives and actions. These evaluations and rankings are always the expression of the needs of a community and herd: that which benefits *it* the most – and second most, and third most – is also the highest standard of value for all individuals. With morality the individual is instructed to be a function of the herd and to ascribe value to himself only as a function. Since the conditions for preserving one community have been very different from those of another community, there have been very different moralities; and in view of essential changes in herds and communities, states and societies that are yet to come, one can prophesy that there will yet be very divergent moralities. Morality is herd-instinct in the individual.[114]

It would therefore be a non-sense to advocate for the destruction of all morality, since humans need to evaluate actions as "good" or "bad".

Yet Nietzsche wages war on Christianity because he considers this religion to be flawed: by constantly comparing reality to the vision of a perfect world, it encourages **guilt** and feeds on **resentment**. In other words, the Christian interpretation of life is hostile to the development of life, at least as it was taking shape in the 19th century. We must therefore conclude that Nietzsche's attacks are part of a tension: his own philosophy intrinsically recognizes the value of Christianity, because the will to power developed through it and continues to do so. At the same time, attacking Christianity gives the philosopher an adversary, something to fight, something to defeat—and therefore something to *know*—in view of the new times that are coming.

In this struggle, Nietzsche then goes on to praise the exceptions, those he calls great artists, and more generally great men[115]. The herd instinct, says Nietzsche, aims to destroy these individuals, seeking to prevent their emergence and working against them while they are alive. Yet it is these individuals who are the key to some of the most decisive developments, developments that necessarily contradict the herd mentality.

On several occasions, Nietzsche attacks conservatives, populists, and democrats, who, relying on the herd instinct, would hinder the emergence of these **great exceptions**. Following his analysis, we understand that when the power of the norm is too strong, it produces an excess of homogeneity that proves harmful to life: it stifles differences and blocks the emergence of forms of life that would be capable of exerting a decisive force of differentiation. Nietzsche, for example, calls Goethe an *eruption* of nature; he evokes Leonardo da Vinci, Beethoven, Julius Caesar, Napoleon. Each of these individuals was

[114] *The Gay Science*, III, §116, "Herd instinct". Trans. by Josephine Nauckhoff.

[115] "The great person is an end; the period of greatness, for example the Renaissance, is an end." (*Twilight of the Idols*, IX, 44) "[T]he goal of humanity lies in its highest specimens" (Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life", §9).

declared “immoral” by the herd morality of their time, because each exerted a force on their era, precipitated change, transforming tastes, practices, politics, and beliefs[116].

Conversely, gregarious instincts include the need to obey and cannot exist without hierarchy, elements that are found in modern bureaucracy, in the State, and in the corporate model. For Nietzsche, this is once again the story of a long development over time, which has ultimately produced the sense of morality that we experience today as self-evident:

> Inasmuch as at all times, since there have been human beings, there have also been human herds (clans, communities, tribes, peoples, countries, churches) and always many more who obey in relation to the small number of those who command—hence in light of the fact that among human beings obedience has so far been practiced and cultivated best and longest, it is fair to assume that the need for obedience is now innate in the average person as a kind of *formal conscience* that commands: "Thou shalt unconditionally do something, and unconditionally not do something," in short, "thou shalt." This need seeks to satisfy itself and to fill its form with content; proportionate to its strength, impatience and tension, it therefore indiscriminately latches onto and adopts like a crude appetite whatever kind of commands—by parents, teachers, laws, class prejudices, public opinion—are screamed into its ears.[117]

Every moral attitude, every ‘categorical imperative’ (to use Kant’s words) is the product of the development of the instincts and their reaction with a *milieu*.

To conclude this study of nihilism, the death of God, and herd instinct, let us summarize Nietzsche's strategy in a few short sentences. 1) On a cultural level, Nietzsche uses polemical analysis to hasten the decline of Christianity, to encourage critical distance from the herd instincts, to debunk imaginary rewards, the culture of guilt and resentment, and the notions of “good” and “evil” — all values invented to maintain control over the herd and exert normative force. 2) Philosophically, Nietzsche makes nihilism the mirror in which the will to truth looks at itself. The one God was an anthropomorphism, the supreme Idea of good a useful fable. In doing so, he invites us to become aware of the will to truth as a problem that concerns life: *knowing* is not neutral, because it is an action that arises from life itself.

The Will to Truth is Will to Power

We find in *Twilight of the Idols* an passage in which Nietzsche summarizes his understanding of this development: “How the ‘real world’ finally became a fable”. He traces the genealogy of the concept of ‘real world’: a world more real than the one we live

[116] Nietzsche values Jesus of Nazareth as a figure of change, a man who was rejected by his contemporaries and murdered because he brought about change. This valuation seems paradoxical, since the figure of Jesus is the basis of a gregarious religion. But in the individual Jesus, the Christian religion did not yet exist. It was only after his death, when a group idealized Jesus in the figure of Christ, that religion was formed and exercised overwhelming normative power.

[117] *Beyond Good and Evil*, V, §199.

in, an ideal world that was, according to Plato and his followers, the 'true' reality. The will to truth led them to it: a world of Ideas, pure, permanent, never changing, therefore always being what they are (=principle of identity), therefore 'true'.

But when this real world finally appears for what it is – a fable –, then the values that were based upon it also appear for what they are: creations of our instincts, nothing true in themselves but true only because we make them true. If we are the ones responsible for our values, then we are also responsible for their decay. The will to truth grew so powerful that in the end it turned against itself—and when it looked at itself, what did it see? That it is made out of the same material as life itself. The will to truth is an expression of the will to life.

This is the turning-point of Nietzsche's **revaluation of all values**: to understand all values as productions of the will to life, of the will to power. 'To know' is an operation whose aim is the growth of the lifeform that enacts it. When we name something and define it, we ascribe it a place in our known universe, we give it a value and position ourselves relatively to it. All of our ideas and beliefs, our sciences, even our grammar[118], our politics, our arts, are productions of our will to life.

A superficial view might come to the conclusion that Nietzsche operated a series of 'inversions' of the Platonian canvas: instead of 'up there', 'down here'; instead of the immortality of the soul, the impermanence of the body; instead of the Ideas, the instincts; etc. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche wrote for example: "But today, thanks to a renewed self-contemplation and deepening of humanity, shouldn't we be facing a renewed necessity to effect a reversal and fundamental displacement of values?"[119] As is apparent here, he was not only speaking of a "reversal" (German: *Umkehrung*) but also of a "fundamental displacement" (German: *Grundverschiebung*). If we talked about a simple 'inversion', we would then eventually miss the point:

> The real world—we have done away with it: what world was left? the apparent one, perhaps?...
> But no! *with the real world we have also done away with the apparent one!*[120]

The concept of the will to power allowed Nietzsche to capture the meaning of the 'real world' *and* of the 'apparent one'. The same happens with pessimism: Nietzsche did not invert it into a new optimism[121], but included pessimism *and* optimism in his semiotics[122] (= theory of signs/symptoms) of the will to power. The consequence is, effectively, a complete *revaluation* of all values, of all knowledge and belief, transposed into the new reality opened by the will to power development-theory.

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[118] Cf. *Twilight of the Idols*, III, §5 (on grammar); VI, §3 (on false causality).
[119] *Beyond Good and Evil*, II, §32. Trans. by Judith Norman.
[120] *Twilight of the Idols*, IV, "How the 'real world' finally became a fable".
[121] We may be tricked by our common use of language here. Pessimism is, in Nietzsche's vocabulary, the type of philosophy which casts a negative judgement on life. The opposite term would be "optimism", but Nietzsche is not an optimist any more than he is a pessimist, since his opinion is that the value of life cannot be assessed objectively (in that regard, Nietzsche can be said to be a *perspectivist*).
[122] Cf. *Twilight of the Idols*, VII, §1.

> Revaluation of all values: that is my formula for the highest act of self-reflection on the part of humanity [123]

The general consequence of this is that all knowledge is necessarily **perspectival**: what I know, I know as I am (and not as the thing is, "objectively," a way of thinking that leaves out the knowing subject). Every act of knowledge is an act by which a form of life enters into relationship with the reality that surrounds it; every act of knowledge—what Nietzsche calls an **interpretation**—is an attempt by our instincts to grasp the reality that surrounds us and metabolize it, giving it a place and a function that *concerns* us. It is important here not to confuse perspectivism with subjectivism: acts of knowledge are not mere "subjective opinions" that concern only the subject; on the contrary, our interpretations involve their object, are in a power relationship with it, from will to power to will to power.

What are the consequences of the *revaluation* for philosophy? Nietzsche made a distinction between two kinds: on the one hand, the 'philosophical labourers' whose task is to study the history of ideas within the canvas of the will to power theory; on the other hand, the actual philosophers, whose role is to create:

> *Genuine philosophers, however, are commanders and law-givers*: they say 'thus it *shall* be!', it is they who determine the Wherefore and Whither of humankind, and they possess for this task the preliminary work of all the philosophical labourers, of all those who have subdued the past—they reach for the future with creative hand, and everything that is or has been becomes for them a means, an instrument, a hammer. Their 'knowing' is *creating*, their creating is a law-giving, their will to truth is—*will to power*.—Are there such philosophers today? Have there ever been such philosophers? *Must* there not be such philosophers?…[124]

Dionysus and the Great Affirmation

Throughout his life, Nietzsche was drawn to a singular figure, Dionysus, the Greek god. Dionysus appears in his writings as the **philosopher god**: a guide, therefore, for a new way of thinking. Dionysus was an important god in ancient Greece, but what Nietzsche made of him transcends the history of religions.

In his first published book, *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music* (1872), Nietzsche studies the emergence in the 6th century BCE of this theatrical form, tragedy, in which a new pessimism seems to be emerging. He interprets it as the encounter between two opposing forces in Greek society at the time: on the one hand, the god **Apollo**, symbol of individuation, moderation, and order; on the other hand, the god **Dionysus**, symbol of dissolution, excess, and chaos. For Nietzsche, it was because the Greeks were experiencing great vitality at the time that they were able to integrate Dionysus into their culture,

[123] *Ecce Homo*, "Why I am a Destiny", §1. Trans. by Duncan Large.
[124] *Beyond Good and Evil*, VI, §211. Trans. by R. J. Hollingdale, with modifications: "genuine" replaces "actual"; "humankind" replaces "mankind"; "ever" added in the antepenultimate sentence; italics added on "*creating*" and "*Must*", according to the German original. Cf. http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/JGB-211

whereas a society with less vitality would have sought to distance itself from this figure, who embodies the negation of social order.

Later, Nietzsche would incorporate Apollo into the figure of his adversary, Dionysus, thus making Dionysus the symbol of life itself, of life as will to power, the overflowing force of nature that constantly destroys and creates new forms.

In *The Gay Science*, Dionysus is called "the one who is richest in the fullness of life," [125] while in Ecce Homo Nietzsche writes that "in the Dionysian symbol, the most extreme limits of an attitude of *yes to life* are reached." [126] It is this power of affirmation that Nietzsche took as his guide; it is in its company that he philosophized. Dionysus is that figure of life who can say yes to everything – to good as well as evil, beyond good and evil – because it is overabundant, because it is in its nature to overcome itself, to overflow itself ceaselessly.

It is in this vein that Nietzsche reinterprets Christianity, particularly the way in which suffering is seen as the product of a curse that human beings brought upon themselves by committing the "original sin." Suffering, in Christianity, is an argument for saying that "life is not good," life *here down* on earth, and that it is better to seek paradise *up there*, which can be reached after death. That suffering is an argument against life was also the view of Schopenhauer (for whom the only solution was the negation of all our desires) and other philosophers, whose thinking Nietzsche described as a *pessimism of weakness*.

Let us remember that Nietzsche suffered physically and mentally throughout his life... but he fought to live despite everything, constantly battling the pessimism that life could inspire him. Dionysus is that figure of life who affirms even pain, reintegrating it into life. Life is not guilty because it suffers; suffering is part of life, something that only a pessimism of strength can look straight in the eye and affirm. Nietzsche thus speaks of Dionysus as a child, because children play their games seriously and destroy what they have built with just as much exuberance… falling and hurting themselves, yet ready the next moment to start again, try a new game, take a new risk, with the same joy at heart.

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[125] *The Gay Science*, V, §370.
[126] *Ecce Homo*, "Why I write such excellent books", "The Birth of Tragedy", §1.