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WITH ARTICLES BY:

JOHN SHAND

MICHAEL HAUSKELLER

STEPHEN LEACH

THE FUTURE OF MANKIND

THE STOIC ATTITUDE

DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT

MEANING, VALUE, DEATH, GOD

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Welcome to the monthly magazine!

Welcome to our monthly, printable round-up of the articles you could read on the Daily Philosophy sites, daily-philosophy.com and dailyphilosophy.substack.com.

The content here is the same as what you could read on Daily Philosophy. The point of this magazine-like format is to make it easier for you to catch up with the articles, in case you couldn't read them when they were published. We are all busy, and having a file that you can on your e-reader might be more convenient than having to read the emails in Outlook or GMail.

If you received this from someone else, please subscribe here to receive your own copy in the future, directly in your inbox!

If you opt for one of the paid plans, which cost only as much as a Starbucks coffee per month, you will also receive one booklet like this every month, plus all books that we will publish over the year for free! You will also be supporting us in our mission to make the world a more thoughtful place!

One warning: Be careful if you send this to your printer. The file is around 45 pages long.

Thank you and have fun reading!

— Andy

John Shand

Meaning, Value, Death, and God

In the world certain things and events have meaning and value for people as individuals. That is to say, they are respectively not just neutral objects and happenings, they have significance, they stand out for attention and to be noted while in addition they are thought to have more or less value. Both the meaning and value are derived from thought, emotion and associated actions. Overarchingly they are derived from our engagement in the world.

Some of these meanings and values are shared with others, but some are highly individual or shared only with a few who are close, such as family and friends. These meanings and values often arise not only from predilections and preferences, but also from the process of shared lives.

Think for example of a family home in which there occurs the death of the last to leave and the resulting collation of not just the objects in it but also the events that happened there. This is the auditorium of one's life, what gives it body and form. When one dies, if one is the last to go, one is just left with a detritus of objects and the ghost of events, actions and happenings, and then in turn those objects are removed or heading away from each other forever, the places where those events took place are overlaid and rubbed out by new ones, until not a trace remains that once had the meaning or value it did. Other events and places apart from homes can have similar meaning and value to the individual, and those meanings and values, that gave sense of what one's life is, are similarly extinguished upon death. Such meanings and values are both part of who we are and extensions of ourselves into the world.

When we die, if there is no-one to remember these personal meanings and values, they evaporate and vanish with our death. This is hard to face for most people. That all those objects, events and places that had the meaning and value they had for them just disappear as having those meanings and values. It is as if they never were, and consequently as they are tied to individual people, as if these people never were also. People need a way of dealing with this. To not be quite forgotten. They do not want it to be as

though what had meaning and value in the end really had no meaning and value. It is hard enough when partings, removals and destructions take place when we are alive, but when we are dead, the annihilation is final and there is no possibility of setting up anew and imbuing a new beginning with meanings and values.

One way to face up to the reality of it is to bear it. When you die, the meanings things had for you, their value to you, die with you. Even if this might be the truth of the matter and the rational thing to believe, it's non-rationally understandable that people believe, or somewhat less firmly, hope-believe, that something else is the case, and that the meanings and values in their lives do not become utterly nothing.

One consolation that has some force are the memories of those who continue after one dies. Friends, family, but most potently perhaps one's children, offspring. It is commonplace to say that they may be viewed, even if in a literal sense it is only tentatively true, as a continuance of oneself. For those who face that truth one might they do so say bravely as it is the best they can expect. For them it is the best just because it is the truth.

But still it does not quite remove the anxiety of one's total erasure, one's drift into nothingness as though one had never been there. Not only might one not be remembered, let alone the minutiae of the meanings and values of things and happenings be remembered; those who do remember will themselves die and their memories with them peter out to nothing. Going from, as it were, a line inflected and nuanced by those meanings and values to one flatline extending off the rest of time.

For some this is not enough. Some desperately try to continue what things mean for them and how they are valued through works and objects that will last a long time. This is the Ozymandias strategy. Yet we know how that turned out. No matter how solid the objects, how grand the works, they will, given enough time, be forgotten and be the dust of nothingness, and be so for ever.

So what would make sure, if it were true, that our meanings and values never cease even after death, that we and they do not become nothing, all quite forgotten? That thorn of blinding anxiety that can overwhelm us and drive us into the darkest corner of helpless despair. It would have to be something that stands outside time and will never forget them. That entity can only be God.

There is no need to hold for the purpose of the argument here whether God exists or not. Personally I think he does not exist. What is the concern here is the reason for the compelling belief in God. For without him, our life will eventually, or even quite soon, have been nothing, as if it never occurred. A terrifying and crushing thought. This will drive hope-belief to put in place anything that will keep that thought at bay.

This, it may be argued, is the main explanation for, some might say, the *invention* of God. The explanation is non-rational, not a result of rational arguments for the existence of God. Which is also why arguments against the existence of God leave believers blithely untouched. As Hume thought: arguments only work against arguments.

It is sometimes said that there are other motivations for believing in God.

One is closely connected to death also, namely a wish that we never in fact really die, that at the end of this life we pass to another life and attain immortality for all eternity. But there is no necessary connection between immortality and the

existence of God. We might attain immortality without there being a God, even if the existence of God makes the former more plausible. This is truly a motivation. But as the nature of such future existence is uncertain, and it is not firmly connected with what one was individually, indeed that is often supposed to be erased as unimportant, it does not have that connection to our particular lives with what had meaning and value to us.

Another reason given for belief in God is the lack of meaning in life without him. Without rehearsing all the arguments connected to that, we can at least say that again such meaning is too non-particular to our lives and its meanings and value, to who we were, to save those from destruction upon death. This is likely to be true even for those trying to make their lives entirely about what they think of as God's meaning for life, for even then the poignancy of the meanings and values of a particular life still sting for all but the extreme ascetic, self-denyingly cutting themselves off from worldly things.

Yet another reason to believe in the existence of God is that without him there would be no morality, no moral truth. But most people have a sense of right and wrong without referring to God. And it's difficult to know what he would think is right or wrong. In any case as Plato perhaps showed, morality exists independently of God for surely God (always) does the right thing rather than what is the right thing being what God does.

Finally, providing an explanation for the existence of the universe might be a motivation for believing in God's existence. But it's hardly likely to be a moving preoccupation that has any bearing on the meanings and values of one's own life, even if God is thought to be indispensable to any solution to how the universe came to exist.

One can contend that to preserve what has meaning and value to you, gives one's life its colour and individual substantial identity, is one of the most acutely powerful reasons for the belief-hope in God. For in God they will be remembered for all eternity and for sure, as God knows all. It may not be the only reason for believing in God, but it is certainly the motivation that carries the most intensity related to the individual, where other motivations are blunter and more theoretical.

For those who do not have such a belief, and indeed cannot, we just have to carry on, one might say, courageously carrying the background burden that not only we but all that we were, will cease to be forever after we die.

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Taking the crowded bus of life

Epictetus on the Stoic attitude.

Reading Epictetus

The interest in stoic books and life advice has been consistently growing over the past few years. Google Trends shows four times more searches for "stoic" now than in 2009. Unfortunately, much of that public interest in Stoicism is, like everything else in our societies, exploited commercially to sell more books and Stoic lifestyle courses. (And yes, I do see the irony that this very sentence will be in the book on Stoicism that I will be publishing three months from now, in a bid to commercially exploit public interest in Stoicism :)).

But we want to do something different and a lot more interesting here. We're going to read Epictetus himself, the ancient philosopher-slave. Surprisingly for a 2000-year-old text, the Handbook of Epictetus is really easy to read (in translation, at least), and, besides the wisdom and gravitas that one would expect, also contains some of the weirdest philosophical arguments ever made in the philosophy of happiness. Unlike many modern philosophers, especially since the advent of the weaponised political correctness movements, Epictetus has the courage to pursue his arguments to their very logical end and he doesn't shy away from conclusions that to the unsuspecting reader must seem obviously wacky (but more on this in our next episode).

Epictetus riding a bus

In his Enchiridion (literally: "handbook"), Epictetus makes the well-known Stoic point (discussed here previously) that we must accept what we cannot change, while still trying to exercise control over what we *can* change:

> When you are going about any action, remind yourself what nature the action is. If you are going to bathe, picture to yourself the things which usually happen in the bath: some people splash the water, some push, some use abusive language, and others steal. Thus you will more safely go about this action if you say to yourself, "I will now go bathe, and keep my own mind in a state conformable to nature." And in the same manner with regard to every other action. For thus, if any hindrance arises in bathing, you will have it ready to say, "It was not only to bathe that I desired, but to keep my mind in a state conformable to nature; and I will not keep it if I am bothered at things that happen."

What he is saying here is that we need to acknowledge that every action is part of a context

Photo by Plato Terentev from Pexels

in which it takes place. Our brains are often focusing on only the action that we intend to perform, without realising that this action will be performed within its inescapable context; and we get angry and frustrated when that context forces consequences upon us that we did not want.

For Epictetus, this shortsighted attitude is the source of much unhappiness in our lives. When I imagine myself taking a bus, what I see is only me, the bus, and my desire to arrive at my destination. What I don't see, but what equally is part of the reality of a bus ride is the long wait at the bus stop, perhaps in bad weather. It is the man in the seat next to me who refuses to wear his mask properly and who is coughing into my direction while talking loudly into his phone. It is the long, slow stop-and-go of morning rush-hour traffic. It is the baby screaming in the seat behind me.

If I go into the bus thinking only of myself, all these annoyances and distractions will make it impossible for me to be happy and at peace during the ride.

But now look how Epictetus reframes the situation: Instead, he says, I should go into that bus seeking to "keep my mind in a state that conforms to the nature of what I am doing." Why should I do that? Well, because no one can escape "nature," by which Epictetus means the reality in which we live, whether we like it or not. A wise person, he says, would realise that taking a bus involves all these annoyances. Only, if we enter the bus with a clear understanding of what we are buying into and with the firm intention of keeping our minds at peace, then all this context ceases to be annoying and instead becomes a kind of philosophical training-ground.

Nobody would see the equipment in a gym as "annoying" because it makes them walk or run on the spot, pointlessly lift weights, sweat and pant. Why not? Because when we go to the gym, we do it precisely because we want to exercise our bodies to be stronger and healthier. The training equipment is not "annoying" us but supporting us in our goal to become healthier human beings.

In the same way, the obstacles and trials that accompany a bus ride are, for the Stoic person, the mental equivalent of gym equipment. A bus ride is not only a way to get somewhere, but it is also always an opportunity to lift some mental weights, to run some patience marathons, to exercise and to strengthen our mental health. When we enter a bus like that, we might almost be a little disappointed if it arrives on time, if everybody in it is quiet and friendly, if we get off without an incident, quickly, efficiently and… without having had any opportunity to grow and develop our Stoic skills. It would be like a visit to the gym when all the equipment is configured to be too easy for us: a waste of time.

Everything else, especially our usual attitude of being annoyed by everything unexpected, is stupid, Epictetus would think: a sign that we are

living in an unreal dream-world where the only certainty waiting for us is a harsh awakening to reality:

> "But," you say, "I would have everything result just as I like, and in whatever way I like." You are mad, you are beside yourself. Do you not know that freedom is a noble and valuable thing? But for me inconsiderately to wish for things to happen as I inconsiderately like, this appears to be not only not noble, but even most base. For how do we proceed in the matter of writing? Do I wish to write the name of Dion as I choose? No, but I am taught to choose to write it as it ought to be written. (Epictetus, Discourses, Ch. 12)

Learning to live, for Epictetus, is just like learning to write. One does not write a word as one likes. *Wun cood, off coarse, doo theat,* but it wouldn't be much use and make life harder, both for oneself and for everyone else. Learning to write involves, crucially, adhering to the rules of writing and spelling words as they ought to be spelled. After all, communication is the whole point of writing, not the expression of one's own orthographical whims.

In the same way, our life is inextricably entangled with the universe around us: with people and things, with places, institutions, events, accidents, feelings. It is folly to believe that we can live it the way we imagine without taking all that world that surrounds us into account. Just like orthography is the basis for happy and effective writing, the Stoic acceptance of the nature of things is the basis for a happy and effective life.

Michael Hauskeller

Nothing Matters. Or Does It?

What exactly do we mean when we say that "nothing matters"? More than sixty years ago, the British philosopher Richard Mervyn Hare attempted to answer this question in an early essay.[1] The way he answers it is intended to convince us that the view that "nothing matters" is an untenable position, and quite obviously so.

Hare starts his essay by relating the story of a young Swiss student staying with the Hares, who after reading Albert Camus' *L'Etranger* (The Stranger) suddenly became convinced that "nothing matters".

Hare then proceeded to talk him out of it in Socratic fashion: when we say that something matters what we do is express *concern* about that something. Concern, however, is always *somebody's* concern. Therefore, when I say that something matters, I express *my* concern for it. I am saying that it matters to *me*. Accordingly, when you say the same, then you express *your* concern for that thing. You are saying that it matters to *you*. Neither of us is then really saying anything about the thing in question. We are only saying something about ourselves.

Now most of us are in fact concerned about many things. And so, apparently, was Hare's Swiss student, which means that things *did* matter to him, which means that they did *matter*, period. For the statement "nothing matters" to be true it would have to be true that the one who makes the statement is not concerned about anything at all. So, if *I* am the one who says that nothing matters, then this is true if and only if nothing matters to *me*, and if *you* are the one who says it, then it is true if and only if nothing matters to *you*. Yet if it were true that nothing mattered to me, why would I then bother to make that statement in the first place? It seems I would at least have to care enough to find it worth pointing out that nothing matters, in which

[1] "Nothing Matters" was written in 1957 when Hare was 38. It was originally published in French as "Rien n'a d'importance" in *La Philosophie Analytique*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit 1959, and later reprinted in English in Hare's *Applications of Moral Philosophy*, London: Macmillan 1972, 32-47. I am using another reprint, the one in in *Life, Death and Meaning*, ed. D. Benatar, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield 2004, 41-47.

case I would have immediately contradicted myself.

The reason we may not be immediately aware of this contradiction is that we tend to misunderstand the function of the word "matters". Its function is to express (somebody's) concern. It does not tell us anything about the nature of things. Contrary to what we seem to think when we declare that nothing matters, mattering is not something that things do. My neighbour may both chatter and matter, but while the chattering is something that she actually does, the mattering is not. In that sense it is quite true that things do not matter (which is to say that they do not engage in an activity called mattering), from which we can easily, but mistakenly, infer that nothing matters: we take a deep and hard look at things, fail to observe any mattering activity in them, and then conclude that nothing matters. However, we have looked in the wrong place. We should have looked at ourselves. If we had done that, we would most likely have found that some things do matter, namely to us and therefore in the only way something *can* matter.

There may of course be people out there who are not concerned about anything much, but they are an exception, and even if nothing matters to *them*, this has no bearing on the question what matters, or should matter, to *us*. Instead of wondering whether things matter, Hare suggests in conclusion, we had better ask ourselves *what* matters to us, what matters *most* to us, and what *should* matter to us and how *much* it should matter. These are all important life questions. *Whether* things matter is not.

But is Hare right to say that what we mean (and all we *can* mean) when we say that something matters is that it matters to *us*? Is the function of saying "it matters" really the expression of one's own personal concern, and nothing else? Is there really no difference between "this is important" and "I find this important"?

Personally, I am inclined to agree with Hare, mostly because I don't see how things can matter if they don't matter to someone, and *how* they can matter other than by mattering to someone.

On the other hand, it seems to me that when we say something like "nothing matters" we do not really mean to say that nothing matters to *us*. That is why we would, when we say this, not feel contradicted if somebody pointed out to us that some things do in fact matter to us. We already knew that, and never meant to deny it. So apparently it is something *else* we wished to express by saying that 'nothing matters'. But the question is, what *do* we mean if we don't mean that nothing matters to *us*? I find this question very difficult to answer.

Consider the following fictional dialogue between Jack and Jill:

> Jack: Nothing matters!
> Jill: What do you mean, nothing matters?
> Jack: What I said.
> Jill: So, what you mean is that nothing matters to *you*, right?
> Jack: No, I don't mean that at all. In fact, it matters very much to me that nothing matters. I'm extremely concerned about it!
> Jill: But if you are concerned about it, then there clearly *is* something that matters.
> Jack: Yes, but only to *me*. The point is that it doesn't really matter what matters to me or if anything does. It doesn't matter whether or not things

matter to people, me included.
Jill: Okay, but what do you mean when you say it doesn't matter? If they matter to you, and they matter to me, if there is *somebody* to whom they matter, how can they still not matter?
Jack: They do not matter in the sense that it makes *no difference* whether or not they matter to me, or if they exist or not exist.
Jill: No difference to you, you mean?
Jack: No, not to me. To me it does make a difference.
Jill: To whom then?
Jack: To nobody in particular. It simply makes no difference.
Jill: But it *does* make a difference. After all, if those things didn't exist or if they were different, *other* things would be different, too, wouldn't they?
Jack: Yes, but not in the *long* run. A time will come when the world will be exactly as it would have been if things had been different. Say in 5 billion years when the sun will swell up and swallow Earth. None of the things that we do now will then have made any difference. So when I say nothing matters I mean that nothing matters *ultimately* or in the long run.
Jill: Okay, fine, perhaps what happens now and what we do and whether we live or die makes no difference in the long run. But all of this certainly makes a difference *now*. Why should we want it to make a difference for all eternity?
Jack: Well, I guess you are right. Although when that future comes, there will also be nobody left to whom anything matters that matters to us now. And then nothing will matter anymore, right?
Jill: Yes, correct, but why should we worry about that? Perhaps one day nothing will matter anymore, but that day is not here yet. That nothing *will* matter does in no way show that nothing matters now. Because things *do* matter now. So what is your problem?
Jack: Oh, I don't know. You are confusing me. Let's go and have a drink. It doesn't really matter anyway.

Still, it remains difficult to consistently think about 'importance' or 'mattering' the way that Hare suggests we do.

Hare himself seems to forget what he has just told us when he advises us to "learn to prize those things whose true value is apparent only to those who have fought hard to reach it." This is clearly something that matters to Hare. However, in suggesting that this matters he is also clearly not merely expressing his own concerns. He is, rather, expressing the belief that we, too, should be concerned about it. So 'this matters', at least in this particular instance, means, in addition to "this matters to me (= Hare)", "this *should* matter to *you* (= the reader)".

Why should it, though? The reason seems to have something to do with some things being *truly* valuable and others not, yet if Hare's own analysis were correct, it would make little sense to assert that things have a "true value" that is not in some way apparent to us. What we would mean (and all we *could* mean) when we say that "something has true value" is that it has true value *to us*.

But in that case it would make no sense to say that the "true value" may not be apparent to us. If having such a value means having such a value *to us*, then it needs to be apparent to us. Yet the very term "true value" is designed to suggest that we may be mistaken about a thing's true value (just as, perhaps, we can be mistaken about what truly matters, or that things matter at all). "True value" implies the possibility of "false value", but it would be very odd to say that certain things have a false value for me. They either have value or they don't. That their value is false can only mean that even though they *appear* to be valuable to me, they are *in fact* not valuable at all. Accordingly, to say that something is *truly* valuable can only mean that it has value even if I am unable to see it (so that it has no value to me). Yet if nothing matters unless, and to the extent that, it matters to someone, then nothing has value either unless, and to the extent that, it has value to someone.

Clearly, though, some of the things that appear valuable to us are actually rather bad for us, while others that we don't much care for are in fact, or would be, good for us. So there is a sense in which things can be valuable even though we attach no importance to them. And yet, even though they may not have value *to* us, they still need to have value *for* us.

Not everything that *appears* good (important or valuable) to us *is* good, but whatever is good must in some way be good for us (or for someone). If it has value for nobody, then it is hard to see how it can have value at all. Likewise, things may matter for us even if they don't matter to us, but they cannot matter if they don't affect us in any way. We may reach a stage in our lives where nothing matters to us, but even then some things will continue to matter for us in the sense that they can affect us, making our lives better or worse. Only if nothing mattered both to us and for us would it be true that 'nothing matters.'

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His publications include Biotechnology and the Integrity of Life (Routledge 2007), Better Humans? Understanding the Enhancement Project (Routledge 2013), Sex and the Posthuman Condition (Palgrave Macmillan 2014), The Palgrave Handbook of Posthumanism in Film and Television (ed. with T. Philbeck and C. Carbonell, Palgrave 2015), Mythologies of Transhumanism (Palgrave Macmillan 2016), Moral Enhancement. Critical Perspectives (ed. with L. Coyne, Cambridge University Press 2018), and The Meaning of Life and Death (Bloomsbury 2019).

Cover image by Cindy Tang on Unsplash.

Come, Visit the Future!

Image by NASA

All NASA posters are here (link).

A trip to our future

It's great to see you here! You've come to just the right place.

This is the first post in a new series where we'll look, week after week, into the possible futures of mankind. What will our future and that of our kids be like? Will we terraform Mars? Will we live in cities that soar above the clouds of Venus? Will robots take over and enslave us? Will we ever meet aliens?

In this series, we'll go to philosophy, history and science in search of answers. We will look at how art and science-fiction imagine our future. I am a university lecturer in philosophy, and this series of posts first began as a lecture on "Technology and the Future of Mankind." But if hours upon hours of university lecturing is not your thing – well, then just stay right here on this page. In this series of posts, I've put together everything that I found exciting and amazing, while skipping all the boring stuff.

I hope that you'll have the same fun that I had when I was researching these posts: the fun of taking a small peek into the mists of our future.

What will it be like, our future?

Will we live in a world like that of New Generation *Star Trek,* where everyone has a crisp clean uniform, a smile on their face, and gets to spend their free time in Ten Forward, looking out of the panoramic windows into the promise of endless adventure? Will we have a future, like Gene Roddenberry's vision, in which there are no wars, no poverty, no hunger, no money? In

Image by NASA

which we work only to perfect ourselves, as Captain Picard is fond of saying?

Or will it be the world of Ridley Scott's *Alien?* Badly paid space workers, crammed together into dirty mining ships that roam the solar system for resources, owned by companies that exploit their employees in the ruthless pursuit of more inequality and power?

Or will it be *Blade Runner?* A world in which we cannot any more distinguish between man and machine? A world in which not even oneself knows what kind of thing one is… Will it be like that?

And what about space?

Will we ever fly through space like in those movies? Colonise the solar system? Live on the shores of a lake on Titan, or underwater in the oceans of Enceladus? Will we live in glass domes on the red sands of Mars? And will we be able to leave the solar system? Fly to other stars? Will we cross the galaxy, utilising warp drives and dilithium crystals, or will we have to finally surrender in the face of the enormous distances between the stars?

Will we be tied to our little planet forever?

Tourists in space?

In 2016, NASA created a series of posters that show off the tourist attractions of the universe. Nightlife on planets where the sun never rises, planet hopping in the Trappist-1 system, a walk on the bright red grass of an alien world… Will this ever be our reality?

Of course, we cannot know the future, and perhaps that's for the best. But we can try to use all our available resources to make an educated guess.

There *are* things we know about the future: We know how humans behave, how societies develop, and what priorities drive our decisions. We have a long history to look back upon and learn from. If technologies developed in a particular way in the past, again and again, then perhaps these patterns will repeat in the future too.

And then, we have about fifty years of modern, hard science-fiction to give us ideas and inspiration, alongside our real-life spaceships, moon landings, mars exploration projects, self-driving cars and the recent AI explosion. Using all these, we might at least *try* to get a sense of where we might be heading with our world.

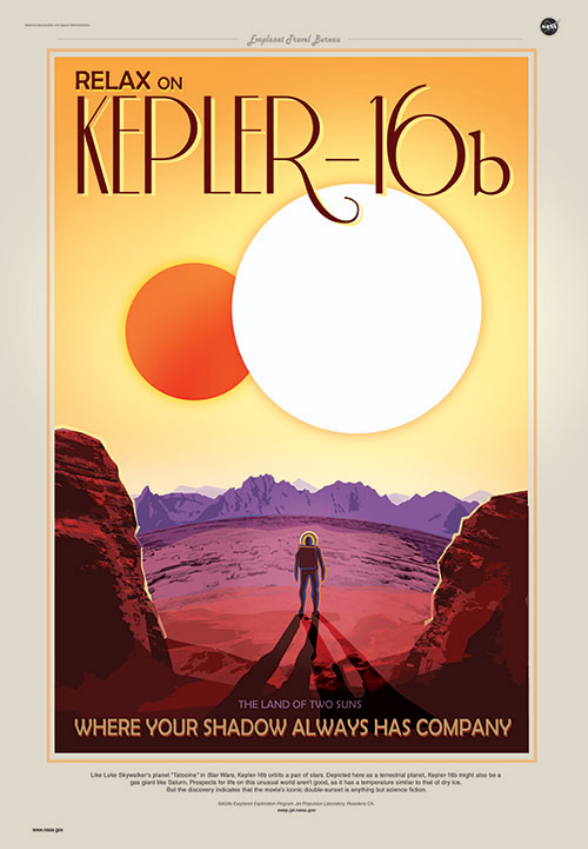


Image by NASA

When we talk about the future, we always imagine a *technological* or post-technological future. "Futuristic" is almost synonymous with "technological." In order to understand our future, we will therefore have to begin by examining what technology is and how it affects our societies.

Progress and democracy

And we will have to talk about progress. What really *is* progress? Is technological progress something different from social progress? Or do both always go hand in hand? Has technology in the past made us better, happier people? Or did we live better lives 500 years ago? Or perhaps even 5000 years ago? Some say that the development of agriculture was where things first went south. Hunters and gatherers had easier lives, worked less, were healthier and had more fun. Or not?

We will also look at politics and democracy. In the past two hundred years or so, we have embraced and cultivated the view that democratic governments are the best way to organise a society. But what happens when we add our advanced technologies to the mix? We know today about the effects that social media like Facebook and Twitter have on democracy, and it's not always a pretty picture. But perhaps the fault is not with social media but with democracy itself. In a society that's governed by a future benevolent and all-knowing AI, does it even make sense to leave decisions in the hands of people that might be fallible, greedy, selfish, corrupt, or uneducated? If not, can we justify taking away human freedom in the name of a benevolently paternalistic, absolutist AI dictatorship?

And does democracy even scale the way we need it to?

Originally, democracy was a way for the 30,000 male citizens of Athens to talk to each other and engage with the issues that affected them all. This model was never meant to apply to the one billion citizens of China or India, or even to the thirty or fifty billion that might, one day, live and die all over the solar system. But if democracy has outlived its usefulness, what is there to replace it?

The environment

Of course, in a series like this, we will also talk about environmental destruction: the most likely

reason that we won't actually *have* a future beyond perhaps a few hundred years from now.

It's not only global warming that we will have to face. It's unsustainable fishing practices, extinction of species, including vital insect life, the poisoning of land and water through agriculture and industry, ocean plastics and microplastics, radioactivity, clean water. One thing we don't have is a lack of environmental problems, and while some may deny that global warming is to be taken seriously, there is no denying that all the other issues are also out to get us and terminate our civilisation (if it deserves that name).

Reminds me of a reply, attributed by the Internet's collective memory to various different people; so let's just leave it anonymous. A famous person was once asked: "What do you think of human civilisation?" And the great thinker replied: "I think it would be a good idea."

And there are many other topics coming up later on. We will talk about energy, medicine, and nanotechnologies. About AI and robots. About planetary catastrophes and what we can do to prevent them or, alternatively, to recover from them.

At the end of the series, we will have enough material to try and predict what the world might look like in 50, or 100, or 500 years. Of course we will be wrong. But we will have had fun getting there.

But what about 5,000 years? And what about the far future of the Earth and our solar system? Even if we don't destroy it, our planet won't exist forever. At some point, all life on Earth will end. How will this happen, and when?

I am so excited to share this journey with you! Depending on where you read or listen to this, click here to go to Daily Philosophy and subscribe, so that you don't ever miss a post! Please also don't forget to share these posts on your favourite social media program, so that others may also have an opportunity to learn about our journey and come along.

Welcome to Our Future!

Somebody to Love

Are we all exchangeable, as Epictetus thinks?

A Stoic at a dinner party

I promised last time to show you the slightly mad side of the famous Greek philosopher. It all begins quite inconspicuously and respectably. Epictetus compares life with a dinner party:

> (15) Remember that you must behave in life as at a dinner party. Is anything brought around to you? Put out your hand and take your share with moderation. Does it pass by you? Don't stop it. Is it not yet come? Don't stretch your desire towards it, but wait till it reaches you. (Epictetus, Handbook)

There are multiple ideas that are central to the Stoics here. The main point is that we don't have *control* of the outside world and what it will present to us or keep away from us. One does not have control over the dishes served at a dinner party. In the same way, one cannot really make sure that one's job will be satisfying, that one's marriage will be happy, that one's health will always be perfect, or that one's children will not have accidents.

Of course, our own behaviour can influence our chances to lead healthy and happy lives. We can take care of our health, choose our jobs wisely, put effort into a good relationship with our spouse and try to protect our children. But, as most of us have probably already discovered, our own efforts are only part of the equation. One can never be *sure* that one will not be the victim of a heart attack. One's children may be involved in a traffic accident no matter how careful we are. And one's partner may still find the plumber more attractive than oneself one day.

It is really not that different from a dinner party. One can avoid dinner parties one knows to be boring; or where aunt Annie is in charge of the kitchen. But even the most promising invitation can turn out to be a disaster in the end for all sorts of unpredictable reasons.

If, as good Stoics, we want to minimise the negative effects of a bad dinner party on our happiness, it is prudent to attend the party without too many expectations. This is why a Stoic wouldn't

reach for the food. It might not be that good, after all. But even if it is good, there is always the seed of disappointment in everything: the best bits might be gone when the plate arrives at our place. Or the wrong plate may come to our side of the table.

We should be cultivating a calculated indifference to the food, Epictetus thinks. In this way, we maximise our chances of staying in a happy frame of mind and being able to enjoy the party regardless of the food. If the food is not good, or we don't get any of the good bits, we can still enjoy the conversation, the music, the atmosphere, the jokes. If, instead, we are disgruntled, disappointed and tired from unsuccessfully chasing after the food we'd like, then we will be much less likely to have fun that evening. It will be much harder for us to enjoy whatever positive experiences the party would have to offer.

So far, this is a pretty obvious point, that many philosophers, not only Stoics have made. (Epicurus had similar ideas).

Epictetus in weird mode

Here's how the quote above continues:

> … Do this with regard to children, to a wife, to public posts, to riches, and you will eventually be a worthy partner of the feasts of the gods.

Again, this is understandable. Not everyone can have children, not everyone will find a suitable partner, not everyone will be rich. By focusing on our desires for such things, we just increase the likelihood of being disappointed if things don't turn out as we would like. Life, like a dinner party, has a lot to offer. Being fixated on the one thing that we can't have, however important this may seem, only prevents us from enjoying what we *do* have.

But Epictetus does not stop there. A few lines earlier, he writes:

> (11) Never say of anything, "I have lost it"; but, "I have returned it." Is your child dead? It is returned. Is your wife dead? She is returned. Is your estate taken away? Well, and is not that likewise returned? "But he who took it away is a bad man." What difference is it to you who the giver assigns to take it back? While he gives it to you to possess, take care of it; but don't view it as your own, just as travelers view a hotel.

There are many interesting things to see here.

One is the psychological difference between "losing" and "returning." The metaphor with the hotel is interesting and instructive. Indeed, when we visit a hotel, we are never sad about the loss of our hotel room when the holidays are over. (We might be sad about the end of the holidays, but that's another point). Obviously, and the hotel example shows this clearly, we *are* able to temporarily possess things without being attached to them. We *are* able to enjoy a hotel room without being devastated by its loss when we move out.

Why, then, can we not do the same with "our own" things?

I put "our own" in quotation marks there, because Epictetus would dispute that anything is

ever "our own." See how he talks above of "the giver," a strange, almost religious reference. It emphasises that, in his view, we never "earn" anything. We never "possess" anything. Things are given to us, in a kind of loan, and if we think that we "deserve" them, then we are misguided and mistaken.

The Stoic commitment to seeing the world as it is demands that we recognise that we are not better than the other man. We are all born equally naked and poor. It is only the chance of our birth, our family, our class, our country that makes us be rich or poor, healthy or ill, advantaged or disadvantaged, educated or illiterate. Even our mental abilities are not "ours." We're born with a brain that is affected by hereditary factors (nothing we could control), but also by our upbringing. Our brains are shaped by the language we speak, the toys we played with as babies, the music our parents listened to, the friends we had, the books we read. All of these have not been our own choices and we cannot claim any praise for the good luck that we had. Equally, we cannot blame ourselves for whatever went wrong in the set-up of the accidental circumstances of our lives.

The weirdness begins when Epictetus, always the philosopher, applies this insight not only to hotel rooms. In the same way, he thinks, we should also view our family members:

> Is your child dead? It is returned. Is your wife dead? She is returned.

Really?

In a sense, yes, we can see how Epictetus arrives at this point. Of course, I cannot claim any right to the members of "my" family. I didn't create them, I don't own them. They are not "mine" in any real sense of the word.

It is unfortunate that English (and many other languages) uses possessive structures to talk about association. "My" family expresses association, just as "my" university, "my" country, "my" religion. I don't own these things in the same way as I own "my" coffee cup or "my" coat. But we don't have another, more correct way of expressing association, so we're stuck with this confusing and wrong way of speaking and thinking.

Perhaps we should change language and talk about association without using possessives. "The family I'm a member of," rather than "my family". "The religion I follow," rather than "my religion." But I think that Epictetus would disagree. His point is even more radical: even with those things where we feel justified using possessives, we're actually wrong.

We possess nothing at all.

"My house," even if I've bought it, even if I've built it, is no more "mine" than "my family." It is a building that it standing there. Yes, I initiated and coordinated its creation, but this doesn't make it "mine." The money that I used to pay for it wasn't really mine. Again, it goes back to a job that I got because of properties that I'm not really to praise or to blame for: my upbringing, my education. The ability of my parents to pay my way through university. The choices of others to hire me, to mentor me, to help me or to hinder me at a thousand random points along the way. The street on which the house stands is not mine, and yet it is necessary; without it, the house could not exist there. The company that planned it, the workers who built it with their hands, the infrastructure that supplies water and electricity to it – all these are not mine. The state that made the building laws, the bank that gave

Photo by Nihal Demirci on Unsplash

me the loan to pay for the house. The police who keep the streets safe so that I can enjoy living there… all these are not mine. They are not even the slightest bit in my control. "I" am no more than a focal point on which all these forces converge to create a house. Calling it "mine" is just a wrong use of language, a mistaken view of the world, an error in perception.

Somebody to love

> Somebody (somebody) ooh somebody (somebody). Can anybody find me somebody to love? (Lyrics from Queen, Somebody to Love)

And now we are finally where Epictetus wants us. If the perception that "I" own things is an illusion, and if my first person perspective is also an illusion (as we already discussed here), then all people are actually interchangeable. Individuals are irrational misconceptions. What truly exists are only categories of things that are all equally valuable. Therefore, Epictetus says:

> (3) With regard to whatever objects give you delight, are useful, or are deeply loved, remember to tell yourself of what general nature they are, beginning from the most insignificant things. If, for example, you are fond of a specific ceramic cup, remind yourself that it is only ceramic cups in general of which you are fond. Then, if it breaks, you will not be disturbed… (Epictetus, Handbook)

What counts is not the individual thing, but the *kind* of thing that it is. Things, we would say today, are *fungible,* mutually interchangeable. If I replaced your favourite cup while you were sleeping with another, identical cup, you'd never know the difference and you wouldn't be sad. Why then are you sad when it breaks? You can buy another that will do just as well.

But what about people? Here is the last sentence of paragraph 3 of Epictetus Handbook. This comes immediately after the passage above:

> … If you kiss your child, or your wife, say that you only kiss things which are human, and thus you will not be disturbed if either of them dies. (Epictetus, Handbook)

Seriously?

One must say that, as crazy as this sounds, there is some plausibility to it.

For one, most people, with only hopeless romantics exempted, would agree that there is more than one person that we can love. Many of us have loved multiple times, and we wouldn't say that any of these loves were necessarily worse or

less genuine than others. When we come of age to love, we fall in love with the first suitable object. Who this turns out to be is largely a matter of chance and circumstance. If I spend my youth in Germany, I'll be likely to meet a German person who will become my husband or wife. Had my parents lived expat lives in Kenya, I would very likely have fallen in love with a Kenyan person.

And even within one place: what if I had never gone to that party where I met my future wife? Would I never have married? Unlikely. Most of us will probably assume that I'd have met someone else a few days later, at another party. I'd still be married, still have a family – just with an entirely different person.

Are lovers exchangeable?

There's a whole discussion in the philosophy of love about this point: is the object of love replaceable? Is not everyone looking for a partner with a number of attributes (tall, blond, humorous, looking like Harrison Ford)? And will not everyone who fits the bill be a suitable object for our affections?

Is this true? Although I'm a romantic, I must admit that it sounds plausible. But then, I must also accept that if partner A dies or leaves me at some later point in time, there's no good reason why another potential partner B, with the same properties as A, couldn't be a perfect replacement.

Or is there something else to A that will make them special and irreplaceable? But if this was the case, then how likely was it that I would meet A in the first place? If we look around, it seems that, by and large, most couples seem reasonably happy. If there was only one person for every one of us, shouldn't there be an overwhelming majority of people around who just never found their destined partner? Shouldn't then almost all relationships be deficient? (All, except for the one-in-seven-billion, who happened to find just the right person for them at just the right moment). This seems to suggest that we can do just fine with more than one specific person as a partner.

But of course, even if we admit that perhaps there are multiple potential loves for every one of us, having already entered into a relationship with a particular person changes things. The same applies for having an attachment towards a particular, individual object. The *relationship itself,* the history of my interaction with that particular person or object produces something new. Shared history creates a bond that I don't have with any of the other people with the same properties as my beloved. Because, although they would have been, at the time when I first met them, equally valid objects for my affections, now, twenty years later, they are not. The history of my life with my actual partner has created a relationship that can never be duplicated with any of the others.

I don't know what Epictetus would say to this. It's not a difficult thought, and I believe that even in his time, without the benefit of modern analytic philosophy, Epictetus' contemporaries must have felt how odd paragraph 3 of his Handbook sounded…

Or perhaps not?

Let's not forget that there's a long history of religion, for example, discouraging us from individualising love too much. *Agape,* Christian love, looks at all human beings as equal. We don't (or shouldn't, in any case) look at the properties of a particular beggar who asks for our charity. In-

stead, the Christian God's command is to love all equally.

Charity, like justice, is best pictured blind.

The same, without the Christian background, would also be the opinion of Immanuel Kant. For him, mere things have a value that can be measured and exchanged (one egg for two slices of bread, for example). But human beings cannot be exchanged for one another. Kant here disagrees directly with Epictetus. For Kant, every human being has a *dignity,* a kind of value that is absolute and demands absolute respect and that cannot be traded in for the dignity of others.

So who is right?

Are we individuals, non-fungible, dignified, irreplaceable? Or are we just different in irrelevant detail, while we're "really" best thought of as exchangeable parts of a kind, just like computers that roll off a factory assembly line, all alike? Are we like zebras, different only in the pattern of our individual stripes, but essentially indistinguishable from each other in every respect that really matters?

I don't have the answer, Epictetus didn't have it, and no one else seems to have it. After all, philosophy is the art of asking the interesting *questions.* Perhaps the wise Stoic should leave it at that.

And learn to love a *kind* of cup, rather than this particular one.

The Future, the Horse, the Car and the Printer

Can we predict technologies' effects?[2]

Horse manure

Our journey into the future begins with the past.

That's not surprising. If one wants to understand the effects of technologies on the future, a good way is to start by looking at how past technologies changed the world. We have a millennia-long history of inventing new and shiny things, letting them loose, and dealing with the results. It's not like we just started creating technological artefacts yesterday.

When we look at how technologies have shaped our world, one of the first things we'll notice is that every new technology has two different kids of effects on the world. On the one hand, there are the anticipated, planned, wanted and obvious effects it was created for. But, on the other hand, every technology also has unanticipated, obscure, unexpected, surprising and sometimes terrible effects that no one could have foreseen before the technology came to be widespread.

Private cars are a good example.

Initially, the idea was that cars would allow us to travel faster and safer than with horses. And not only that. Horses, by the end of the 19th century, had created a peculiar problem. They filled the cities of Europe and the New World with poop. The horse manure problem was so great that in 1894, The Times predicted that 50 years later, every street in London would be buried under nine feet of manure. At that time, around 50,000 horses were in use on the streets of London. 100,000 in New York, producing about 2.5 million pounds of manure each single day [1]. Things didn't look good. There was no way this was going to be remotely sustainable.

Fortunately, around that time inventors all over the Western world were working on creating the first cars with an internal combustion engine. In 1908, the Ford Model T began production. Ford would eventually build around 15 million of them. Cars would replace horses in all major cities of the developed world. Only twenty short years after the Times' dire prediction, the problem of horse manure had been solved for good.

[2] Much of this article is based on source [3] (see below).

Photo by Philip Schroeder on Unsplash

That was the obvious, the intended effect of creating motorised cars.

But what of the effects that were not obvious at that time?

The motorised car's real effects

What nobody cared much about until almost a century later, was that cars created their own pollution. Poisonous air instead of horse droppings. Lung cancer in cities: "Close to half of all deaths by transport air pollution caused by diesel on-road vehicles, says new study" [4]. Car accidents caused millions of victims. Death by car is now the 8th most common cause of death globally [5]. The car is one of the major contributors to global warming. Private cars account for about a fifth of the total CO2 emissions of the US [6].

But effects go far beyond the direct harm that cars cause to people.

Over the course of the 20th century, enormous wealth and power was concentrated in the hands of a few powerful people. The oil-producing states of the world completely upset the previous distribution of global power.

The traditional structure of cities was destroyed. City centres were slowly overrun by traffic. In the 50s and 60s, they were rebuilt as extensive street networks and traffic hubs. They displaced neighbourhoods, parks, shopping streets and pedestrian traffic.

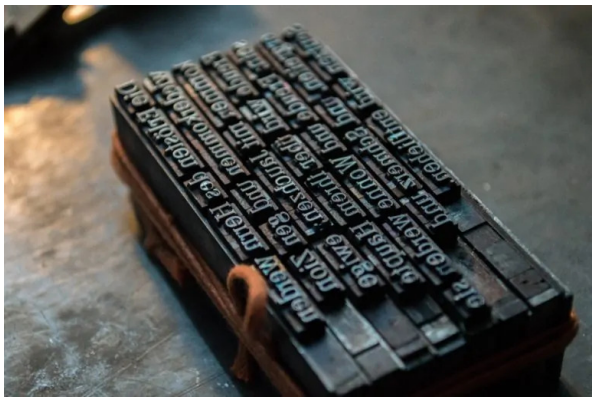
Businesses relocated out of the expensive and dead city centres into the cheaper countryside. The new, giant suburban malls and superstores were only accessible by private car.

Citizens moved out into sprawling suburban residential areas that had no infrastructure for community life. They were dead places, only fit for sleeping until the next workday's commute drove people back to their workplaces. Large parts of cities became inaccessible or unfriendly to pedestrians. They were crisscrossed with wide high-speed car lanes, bridges and overpasses. Often pedestrians were relegated to dark, unsafe and dirty tunnels. These often were the only ways to reach parts of the city that had been cut off by the new urban highways.

Long-distance commuting became the new normal expectation of what life was like. Two or three hours of daily living time were lost to being stuck in a traffic jam. This dramatically shortened the time that parents had available to devote to family life and to raising their children.

The dissolution of cities and city life was one of the factors that fuelled online shopping in its early days. Today, online shopping and depopulated city centres lead to the collapse of inner-city shopping streets. Bookshops disappear and with them cultural centres, theatres, cinemas, town halls, independent public performers and other culture that used to thrive in vibrant city communities.

Since the 1970s, in some places people have begun to realise how far this has gone. They fight



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to reverse these trends with the introduction of pedestrian zones, with car-free weekends, parking labels and diesel bans. But it is a long march towards re-humanising city life, and perhaps it's already too late to go back.

Yes, we did get rid of that horse poop. *But at what price?*

Gutenberg's printing press

Around 1450, Johannes Gutenberg of Mainz created his printing press with moving type. The introduction of this new technology made the printing of books a lot cheaper and easier than it had been before. It was almost immediately a great success. The time was ripe for a cheap printing technology. Books would finally become cheaper. They would become available to a broad segment of the population. People would be better educated. Perhaps the power of the church could be constrained and scientific knowledge would finally spread.

These were the dreams. The anticipated, planned, the wished-for outcomes.

What really happened?

Regional dialects declined and were replaced by uniform languages over whole countries, like France or Italy. It wasn't economical to produce a book in dialect for a few hundred readers. A book in a common language could find tens of thousands of readers. So the readers themselves, if they wanted access to the new knowledge, had to learn to speak the new, the common languages. In time, these new languages became the sign of the educated. The dialects were mainly used by villagers, fuelling associations between regional speech and backwardness.

Because printing was cheap, women and outsiders, who had previously been unable to get an audience for their works, were now able to distribute their ideas. But also women, still traditionally working at home, now had access to education, to culture, and to research through books that they could obtain and read in private.

In the 16th century, just fifty years after the invention of Gutenberg's press, Bibles were printed in the national languages people actually spoke (rather than Latin), sparking an interest in reading and literacy. Where before the church alone had access to the Biblical texts, now everyone could own a Bible and check what it said.

One of the consequences of this was that the importance of schooling became obvious. People who could read and write profited from the new technology, while those who couldn't were left behind. So parents began looking at schools not as something superfluous to real life and only of interest to the rich, but as a necessary basis for a good life for their children.

Scientists could now directly address the public. Previously, science was very much limited to a closed circle of a few learned men, cut off from a country's population. Now scientists could finally reach that population and scientific

Photo by Igor Karimov on Unsplash

ideas could be discussed on the streets, in coffee houses, at dinner tables and tea parties and they could develop a social influence that was unheard of before.

Finally, medicine profited from books with correct anatomical images. Before anatomy books could be printed, the only way to really learn what a human body looked like from the inside was to obtain one and cut it open. This was, understandably, difficult – particularly in a Christian Europe where the bodies of the dead were expected to lie undisturbed, waiting for their resurrection at the second coming of the Lord. One couldn't just go around, pulling corpses out of the soil and cutting them open. So anatomy was often studied from hearsay and was heavily based on a few accepted ancient texts and a lot of false beliefs and superstition. "Arteries," for example, are called "arteries" because people believed that they carried some form of air or spirit ("airteries"). It was not until the 15th century that it was finally accepted that arteries were transporting normal blood around the body [7].

The written word

As more people became literate, the importance of the written word increased further. Governments began keeping written records. In England, records of births and deaths were kept from 1538 on, in France from 1539, in Germany from the 1540s [3]. All in less than 100 years from the initial invention of the printing press!

Now governments could also keep written accounts of inventories, money, taxes, land records. This had not been possible previously, because not many government employees were literate, and so most were not able to keep written records. With the new push towards schooling and basic education, the governments were able to hire employees who could read and write and keep effective records.

Licensing started to be required for inn-keepers, food merchants, doctors and nurses, and records of licensed practitioners were kept by the government and the church [3].

Ultimately, it was the invention of the printing press – that one, single technological invention, that was responsible for the transformation of the whole society: from the illiterate, superstitious, limited, strictly hierarchical societies of the Middle Ages, controlled by the church and an ineffective government, to the modern, highly organised, educated, science-based, egalitarian and democratic societies of the 18th century and beyond.

Let's keep this revolutionary, radically transformative potential of inventions in mind as we look forward into the future. We may not be able to guess entirely new technological breakthroughs, but we can perhaps try to imagine what may come out in a hundred years or so, starting

from the technologies that we already know and use today.

Although even that may be hard sometimes. In the 60s, right before the moon landings, the Apollo project and the space race had fired up the public imagination. Scientists planned and predicted giant, rotating space stations like the one seen in Kubrick's movie "2001 – A Space Odyssey". What we got instead, was an unsustainable Space Shuttle program – and humans never left Earth orbit again since the last moon mission returned exactly fifty years ago. And even as recently as 1985, "Back to the Future" was predicting flying cars and hoverboards for 2015. But, as we have all registered with disappointment, none of these predictions came true. Actually, that's wrong. Nike is indeed selling the self-lacing shoes that Marty was wearing in the movie.

Instead of the predicted ones, we got equally magical artefacts that nobody had seen coming: the Internet, a giant, free encyclopedia and storage medium for the knowledge of humanity. Computers with a tiny screen that can be carried in one's pocket and that are all networked and able to talk to each other. Essentially free and instant long-distance communication. The ability for anyone (like me, right now!) to create a publication for others to read, to instantly publish whatever one likes to a world-wide audience of billions. But at the same time, the decline of newspapers and independent reporting. The loss of high street shops to online shopping. The effects of Internet and social media on democracy – and hundreds of other, equally world-changing effects that no one at all had foreseen.

So are we sleepwalking with closed eyes into a future that we are unable to predict? Are we doomed to be eternally incapable of learning from the past? Or can we perhaps utilise our knowledge of history to inform our choices in the present?

Stay tuned. We will talk more about all these questions in the coming instalments of this series! If you are not subscribed yet, you can do so by following this link. You will then not only receive all these posts and all the ebooks that Daily Philosophy will publish during your membership entirely for free – You will also support this site and make sure that we can continue our exploration of the world to come.

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The Dialectic of Enlightenment

Horkheimer, Adorno and the Frankfurt School.

The Frankfurt School

The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is one of the main texts of what has come to be called the Frankfurt School, although it was neither a school nor located anywhere near Frankfurt for much of the time it was active.

The *Frankfurt School* is generally taken to mean a lose collection of thinkers who first congregated around the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. The Institute was founded in 1923 with the money of a wealthy student, Felix Weil, but from the beginning the founders sought to integrate the Institute into the formal university system, so that it could offer lectures, attract academics, get research funding and confer academic degrees.

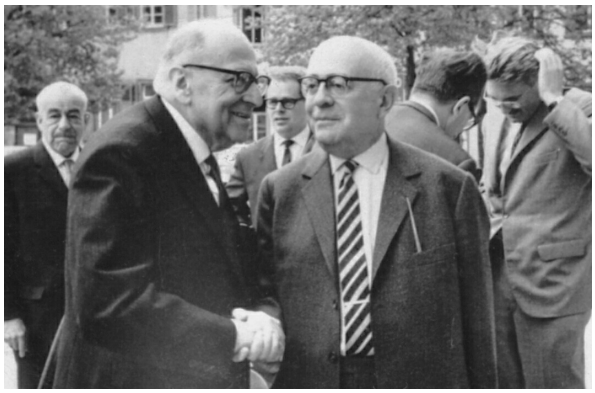
The most prominent of the founding members were Max Horkheimer, who became the Director of the Institute in 1930, musicologist and philosopher Theodor Adorno, psychoanalyst and social psychologist Erich Fromm, whom we already know quite well, and philosopher Herbert Marcuse. Later, many others became loosely associated with the Frankfurt School, for instance Jurgen Habermas, who started out as a doctoral student of Horkheimer's but later went his own way and created his own theoretical framework, distancing himself from the Frankfurt School. Erich Fromm, too, was only loosely associated with the School, having his own research program that emphasised psychoanalysis rather than Hegelian and Marxist philosophy and Critical Theory.

The main topics of the Frankfurt School

The Frankfurt School was, as we said, never a "school" in the narrow sense of having one set of teachings that it promoted through its members.

Instead, it was a loose association of very different thinkers who, for a time, had common research interests and found inspiration and support from working together, despite always also having differences and sometimes fundamental disagreements among them. It was more like a flock of birds who, for a while, find themselves sitting on the same branch of a tree, rather than a pack of wolves that will hunt and live together as closely knit family unit.

What united the Frankfurt School was, first, an interest in Marxism and the question why Marxist teachings had not succeeded in creating the ideal society. As the 20th century progressed, first towards the dictatorship of the Nazi party in Germany and later to the absolutism of our technological consumer societies, the members of the Frankfurt School were asking what the social and psychological mechanisms behind these developments were. What made perfectly normal people into Nazis? What made workers who



Photograph taken in Heidelberg, April 1964, by Jeremy J. Shapiro. Horkheimer is front left, Adorno front right, and Habermas is in the background, right, running his hand through his hair. Source: Jjshapiro at English Wikipedia.

suffered from overwork and poverty in a capitalist state accept their fate rather than revolt? And how could perhaps the trend towards more and more centralisation of power in the hands of a few industrialists be reversed and a better, more just society created?

Dialectic of Enlightenment

The book by Horkheimer and Adorno, published in 1947, became the early poster work of the Frankfurt School and its criticism of capitalist society, later to be followed by Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man.* Both books agree on many of their basic views.

The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is a complex book, addressing many topics: mythology, enlightenment, sexuality and liberation, sickness and psychoanalysis. We will only talk here about the fourth part of the book, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." This part seems to me to be the most practical, easy to understand and immediately applicable to our own lives today. It is amazing how well their criticism of culture has held up over the past 75 years. It reads today as real and fresh as when it was written. It perfectly describes our own problems with our culture industries. Horkheimer and Adorno could not have dreamt of the Internet, of Twitter, Facebook and Netflix, but their criticism of culture applies perfectly to all these modern phenomena. This underlines just how correctly they diagnosed what was happening and how much we need this book and its conclusions, even (and particularly) today.

Horkheimer and Adorno begin with a criticism of mass culture, which they diagnose as having lost every significance or meaning and having become just commercial entertainment:

> All mass culture under monopoly is identical, and the contours of its skeleton, the conceptual armature fabricated by monopoly, are beginning to stand out. Those in charge no longer take much trouble to conceal the structure, the power of which increases the more bluntly its existence is admitted. Films and radio no longer need to present themselves as art. The truth that they are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash they intentionally produce. (p.95)

How did we come to that? Those who make culture, the authors say, tend to explain the uniformity of radio and TV programs (and today, we would add, of Internet content, self-published books, and Youtube channels) by the needs of the millions who consume this content. Standard products just happen to best meet the needs of all

these different people who live in different cultures and in different locations.

But now comes an interesting paragraph. At the end of the same page, Horkheimer and Adorno talk about the difference between telephone and radio:

> The step from telephone to radio has clearly distinguished the roles. The former liberally permitted the participant to play the role of subject. The latter democratically makes everyone equally into listeners, in order to expose them in authoritarian fashion to the same programs put out by different stations. (p.95)

Has the Internet changed the media landscape?

We might feel like questioning this today. Isn't the Internet proof enough that the authors are wrong here? Yes, when we went from telephone to radio we temporarily lost something, but when we went from radio and TV to blogs and YouTube, didn't we get the ability back to be subjects, real participants, initiators of the social media discourse, rather than just passive listeners?

I'm not sure. The list of the 20 most subscribed YouTube channels (end of 2021) includes seven music channels (most non-English, interestingly, with Hindi channels in the first two places), one channel for children, 11 channels about entertainment and sports, and one channel about 5-minute crafts. Many of these channels are owned by the same big names that dominate culture outside of the Internet: Sony Entertainment, Bollywood production companies, World Wrestling Entertainment and Justin Bieber. The most watched video on YouTube is the Baby Shark Dance with 8.8 billion views (one for every human on Earth) and the most viewed video categories are comedy and music. At the same time, there are more than 37 million YouTube channels out there, most of which, essentially, nobody watches.

So has the Internet replaced the telephone in the way that Horkheimer and Adorno hoped? Or has it become just another reincarnation of TV, of a way of pushing prefabricated cultural content down the viewers' throats? With over 75% of watch time going to comedy, it certainly doesn't seem like YouTube is primarily used to educate or to facilitate serious communication between individuals. Other social media do allow people to connect in person, but these also tend, over the long run, to be appropriated, controlled and censored by a system that has the primary purpose of generating income for the companies that own the Internet's real estate: Facebook, Twitter, TikTok.

But Horkheimer's and Adorno's criticism of the modern media landscape goes beyond that: It is not only that modern media exclude many from participating as creators in them (which may be disputed today) — the real problem is that modern culture is all the same:

> That the difference between the models of Chrysler and General Motors is fundamentally illusory is known by any child, who is fascinated by that very difference. (p.97)

This certainly is true of our media landscape, both on- and offline. It is irrelevant whether

I'm watching a channel with 20 or 20,000 subscribers if all I'm seeing is the same stuff on both; and this again is the same I've been seeing over the past days and weeks, thanks to a recommendation algorithm that presents the ever same content to me, trying to shield me from anything that I might dislike, anything that I might find boring or upsetting. YouTube maximises view time (and, consequently, ad income) by presenting me with ever more of exactly what it knows me to like, and by carefully filtering out anything that I might find objectionable, everything I might disagree with or feel offended by. But in this way, the recommendation algorithm takes away that most basic of public functions of truly social media: to be a platform for democratic exchange, for the dissemination of ideas, for dialogue, dissent and dialectic.

Dialectic and cultural uniformity

"Dialectic" is a word that has had many different meanings over its long history. Generally it can be understood as a process of improving one's understanding by contrasting different, opposite approaches or theses and trying to integrate them into a "higher" version of the truth. A dialectic process is inherently pluralistic, because it requires the opposites that it can then synthesise into a new insight. The "media-bubbles" that recommendation algorithms create are by default "one-dimensional" (as Marcuse would put it): they exclude dissent and opposition and create an illusion of harmony and unanimity by cutting off every dissenting voice.

Culture has in the past always contained the seeds of dissent, dissatisfaction with the status quo and artistic suffering. But today it has become something that is administered and rendered harmless inside an officially sanctioned machinery that administrates it:

> To speak about culture always went against the grain of culture. The general designation "culture" already contains, virtually, the process of identifying, cataloging, and classifying which imports culture into the realm of administration. Only what has been industrialized, rigorously subsumed, is fully adequate to this concept of culture. (p.104)

This concept of culture has a built-in way of dealing with dissenters, with those who might be tempted to criticise the sameness and meaninglessness of cultural products:

> By artfully sanctioning the demand for trash, the system inaugurates total harmony. (p.106)

Those who want higher quality products are seen as arrogant and unreasonable, whereas culture "distributes its privileges democratically to all."

This is seen, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, most clearly in the movie industry. It is amazing, how well their diagnoses describe today's movies, over 70 years later.

One characteristic of a movie industry that tries to cater to bland sameness is, they say, that it will only create movies from material that is sure to appeal to the masses. And indeed, this is what we clearly see as a development in the movie industry from the 1970s and 80s to today.

> In film, any manuscript that is not reassuringly based on a best-seller is viewed with mistrust,

they write. This is even more true today. Not even bestsellers are sufficient any more to get a movie project greenlighted in Hollywood. It's best if the movie project is a sequel of another, already proven blockbuster. James Bond 20, Star Wars 13, the Marvel Cinematic Universe: these productions suck up nearly all movie production resources and funding, leaving almost nothing for the creation of original or art movies, cultural products that might be even the slightest bit challenging or different. The consequence of this way of creating movies is that they all resemble each other — not necessarily in the details of the plot, but certainly in their architecture.

Look up "rules of screenwriting" or "screenplay plot structure" on the Internet and you will find endless discussions among movie professionals that all, essentially, boil down to one piece of advice: structure your movie just like any other movie or forget writing for Hollywood. Movies must be predictable, with scripts being rejected if they miss the essential beats and plot-points. The first act must end on page 25, the first half of the second on page 50 and so on. If a screenplay does not hit the right page numbers with its structure, then it is a loser and will be rejected by any Hollywood script reader. This guarantees that all movies turn out to be exactly the same, having the same emotional ups and downs at exactly the same places, with only the names of the characters and the details of their occupations changing. Horkheimer and Adorno:

> This is the incurable sickness of all entertainment. Amusement congeals into boredom, since, to be amusement, it must cost no effort and therefore moves strictly along the well-worn grooves of association. The spectator must need no thoughts of his own: the product prescribes each reaction, not through any actual coherence — which collapses once exposed to thought — but through signals. Any logical connection presupposing mental capacity is scrupulously avoided. Developments are to emerge from the directly preceding situation, not from the idea of the whole. There is no plot which could withstand the screenwriters' eagerness to extract the maximum effect from the individual scene. Finally, even the schematic formula seems dangerous, since it provides some coherence of meaning, however meager, when only meaninglessness is acceptable. (p.109)

In this way, Horkheimer and Adorno suggest, the whole of the culture industry becomes quite the opposite of what "art" used to be. Instead of a critical commentary on life and an imaginative evaluation of alternatives, modern culture becomes one of the pillars of the repressive system. Amusement, they say, always meant to put painful things out of one's mind, to forget suffering:

> At its root is powerlessness. It is indeed escape, but not, as it claims, escape from bad reality but from the last thought of resisting that reality. (p.116)

This cultural uniformity, along with the power of advertisements to prescribe to us the properties that are considered desirable and those to avoid, leads to an ever growing equalisation of people. Instead of individuals, we are now members of a tribe. The initiation ritual may be painful,

but in the end it binds us together and provides our lives with meaning. We see here echoes of Erich Fromm, who also emphasised how becoming part of a tribe, of a group of people, can free us from the anxiety and the existential terror of alone-ness.

The society provides materially for all its members, as long as they accept the society's hegemony over their lives and choices. Officially, it all looks like freedom and democracy. The real control is hidden beneath the surface:

> Formal freedom is guaranteed for everyone. No one has to answer officially for what he or she thinks. However, all find themselves enclosed from early on within a system of churches, clubs, professional associations, and other relationships which amount to the most sensitive instrument of social control. Anyone who wants to avoid ruin must take care not to weigh too little in the scales of this apparatus. Otherwise he will fall behind in life and finally go under. … Specialist knowledge as a rule goes hand in hand with a prescribed set of attitudes … (p.120)

That last point is crucial. The system filters its specialists through churches, clubs, professional associations and other institutions so that, when finally people arrive at positions of power, society can be sure that they have the correct, desired attitudes. Those who don't conform are not forcibly silenced, which would generate discontent and opposition; instead, they are silently left to fall behind in the race for social advancement and "finally go under," leaving no trace.

Let's try it out!

The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* provides an all-encompassing criticism of society and culture. It is difficult to see how one could do anything about a society that insists to feed us with uniform cultural products, that takes away even our imagination of any different world and style of life, that aims to make us into clones, robots, virtually identical copies of each other, endlessly obedient, endlessly patient, with no strength or will left to revolt.

If this was so, what could we possibly do?

Well, there are a number of possibilities. Assuming Horkheimer and Adorno are right (which, like everything in philosophy, can be disputed), we still have at least some chance of trying to escape the total cultural domination of the system. If the system creates all the eternally-same cultural content in order to dull our senses and our opposition, then at least we can recognise its cultural products by just that sameness, that absence of anything interesting, of real depth, of real difference, of real suffering (as they themselves say). And if we can recognise these products as dangerous to our individuality, we can avoid them and instead try to find those pockets of culture that are still genuine, still not taken over by the cultural "machine" (to use an expression from Pink Floyd). And we can recognise these specifically through their being *different.*

How can we apply this to our lives?

For a week, you could make a point of avoiding every bit of mainstream culture and instead try to find those pockets of genuine culture, the forgotten, neglected, anarchic, imaginative and authentic expressions of human imagination. Don't even try TV or Netflix, but you might find something on the forgotten backwaters of YouTube.

The movie industry has been trading in sameness ever since the times of Horkheimer and Adorno, so there is little hope of finding anything of value there. But YouTube does have Marxist channels, for instance. It does have channels showcasing non-European, non-Westernised, indigenous cultures. Listen to some indigenous music from different parts of the world, for example.

Also, you could read books that were part of human history long before our advanced technological societies flattened out our culture. The Bible, the Illiad and the Odyssey, the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Mahabharata, the works of Virgil and Ovid, the works of Dante and Shakespeare, and try to derive inspiration from those. Or read the classic philosophers: Aristotle, Plato, Confucius, Mencius, Lao Tzu. Or read those who were always considered rebels and whom polite society always sought to discredit and silence: from some of the ancient Roman poets through Marquis de Sade to Hermann Hesse, Henry Miller and Anais Nin. One could also read the philosophers of revolt and anarchism: Marx, Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin and many others.

Among spiritual writers, choose those who advocate a life away from society: the hermits, the monks, the Buddhist and Daoist sages, the Desert Fathers and their modern counterparts, the proponents of alternative lifestyles, those who go for foraging instead of shopping in the luxury mall, those living in the wilderness or in their own smallholdings rather than those spending their lives in office towers.

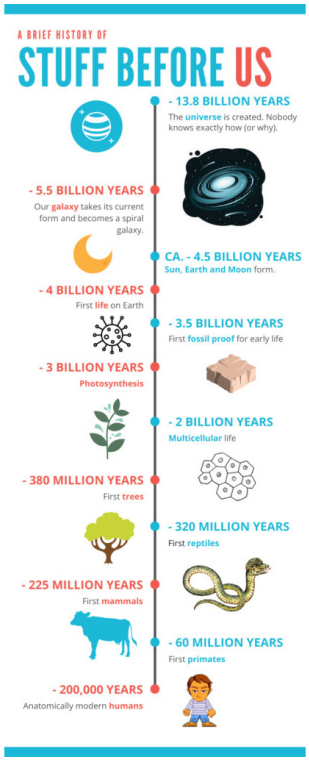
I recently read a fascinating book by Michael Pollan, "This is Your Mind on Plants," where he discusses the mind- (and society-) altering effects of plants, from opium to coffee. I am not advocating using recreational drugs – if anything, our society could do with a lot less alcohol, nicotine and caffeine. But, if we believe the Frankfurt School, then true happiness and satisfaction in life might only be found outside of the narrow confines of what is socially accepted behaviour. And, surely, keeping an open mind towards alternative experiences and lifestyles can only give us more options and more ideas on how to enrich our own lives.

One has to learn to distinguish between those who genuinely have a valuable spiritual path to offer; and those who are just crazy, mentally and culturally bankrupt. Conspiracy theorists, UFO scientists, flat-earthers and paranormal mediums are not manifestations of brave revolt against the society's cultural hegemony, but just misguided and insufficiently educated people who have little to contribute to true education and culture. Sometimes, as in the case of Alexandra David-Neel, it can be hard to decide into which of the two categories specific "inspirational" writers belong.

I have, at times, engaged with many of these pockets of untamed, alternative culture, and I have always come back into my own life refreshed and full of new ideas and with a better, deeper appreciation of what human life can be. Try it out and see how varied and interesting life really is if we just escape the narrow cage that society is constantly trying to erect all around us.

Cover image: Jjshapiro at English Wikipedia.

The Past and the Future



Universe timeline. Daily Philosophy.

A quick look at the whole of history.

Timelines

To get a feeling about how the world might be in 20, 200, or 2,000 years, it is useful to look back to how it was 20, 200 and 2,000 years ago. Then we'll get a sense for the passage of time and how much time brings what kind of change to our lives.

The time that has passed since the beginning of the universe, or even only since the beginning of life on Earth is so long in comparison to the time that human civilisation has existed that it is impossible to plot everything onto a linear scale. So we will have to create multiple timelines with different scales.

The universe

Let's begin. Here is our biggest scale timeline (see Universe timeline at the beginning of this article).

Look at your hand. You have five fingers. Four of them have three visible segments each. One, your thumb, has only two. Together, your fingers have fourteen segments. This is the same number as the age of the universe in billion years. Each finger segment is a billion years in the past. The base of your thumb is where time begins, the start of the universe. The tip of your little finger is now.

Now fold away the thumb. Nothing at all happened in the first two billion years after the creation of the universe; at least, nothing we know of. Fold away the index and the middle fingers too. Still nothing. Only at 5.5 billion years, that is, halfway through the base of your ring finger, our galaxy takes on its current form. Sun, Earth and Moon form another segment up the ring fin-

ger. But the appearance of the first life on Earth is at four billion years, so it comes pretty quick after that, still at the top of your ring finger. Let me repeat that: everything, from the creation of galaxies to the first life on Earth happens on that ring finger.

At three billion years, at the base of your little finger, life learns to use the sunlight for photosynthesis. At the middle segment of your little finger, multiple cells learn to live together as one organism, without eating each other. And then, at the upper third of the top segment of your little finger, we get trees, insects, reptiles, birds, mammals, primates, humans: the whole lot.

Modern humans exist only for about 100,000 years. This is one ten-thousandth of the top segment of your little finger. Imagine dividing that top segment of your little finger into ten thousand parts: the top most of them, and only that one, would contain humans. The time period in which humans exist would be invisible to the naked eye if you tried to mark in on your finger.

Humans on Earth

C. Patrick Doncaster, professor in Ecology at Southampton University, has an excellent, very detailed timeline of the human presence on Earth [1]. We don't need all that information, so we'll just look at a few highlights; but do go visit his page if you are interested to see more detail!

It takes another eternity until, at only 40,000 years before now, the first bone flute appears, together with other bone tools. Cave paintings go back only about 30,000 years. The first farming activities begin at 9,500 years before out time. Cattle was domesticated 7,000 years ago, when the world's population of humans was a mere 5 million people! Think of that: just 7,000 years ago, all humans on Earth, taken together, were fewer than today's inhabitants of Hong Kong or Athens, Greece.

Five thousand years ago, writing was invented, leading to what we call human culture and history.

Four thousand years ago, someone in China ate the first ice-cream. (I wonder how Professor Doncaster found that one out. You'd think that ice-cream would melt rather than fossilise – but perhaps there's a written record of some extremely happy imperial kids in the Chinese palace diaries.) At the same time, in Europe they created the first metallic money, which, in hindsight, perhaps wasn't such a great idea.

About three thousand years ago, humanity passes 50 million. It took us just four thousand years from five million to 50, despite the first records of contraception (3800 years ago).

Only a blink of an eye later, 2600 years ago, we are already at the height of Greek civilisation. Humans have invented democracy, theatre, poetry and philosophy. Merchant fleets are cris-crossing the Mediterranean, carrying wheat and silver, marble and dyes. Buddhism appears around that time, Confucianism, and Euclidean geometry. Islam spreads through Arabia 1400 years ago. Printing, porcelain, astronomical clocks and gunpowder follow about 1000 years ago.

360 years ago, the world's population passes 500 million.

Modern democracy, the ideas of equality and citizens' rights become widespread just 250 years or so ago.

And only in the last 200 years of all those 13.8 billion, we have the development of modern technology: steam engines, electricity, tele-

Photo by Matthijs van Heerikhuize on Unsplash

phones, spaceflight, computers. With it comes modern capitalism and, in the last 100 years, its counter-movement, socialism. The Russian revolution, the Soviet Union, two world wars, atomic bombs, genocide, genetic engineering, cloning, Internet, robots, and the exploration of Mars by robotic probes. Global warming, microplastics, massive biodiversity loss, almost permanently polluted air in the world's metropolitan centres, and a virus that uses our own mobility to its advantage and almost shuts down the entire world within five months.

Time in science fiction worlds

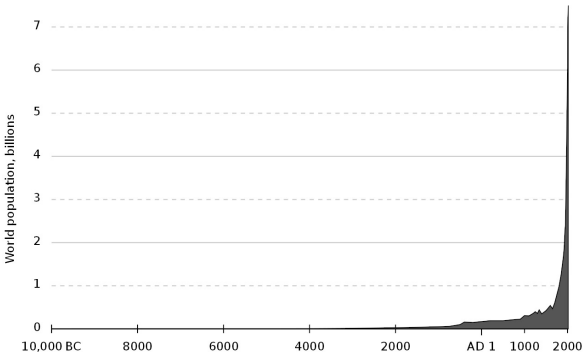
If you look at the future from the perspective of our past, it becomes clear why it's so hard to see where we might be going.

Historical time is not a river that runs at a constant speed, a linear progression, in which a thousand years contain a fixed amount of progress.

Instead, it is a crazily accelerating ride. A thousand years at the beginning of the universe meant no change at all. And it took twenty thousand units of thousand years each for humans to distinguish themselves from other apes. On the other hand, the whole of the ancient Greek civilisation with its tragedies, its laws and courts, its expeditions and wars, and even including the rise and fall of Rome, took all in all less than thousand years. Another thousand years covers all of the dark and Middle Ages until the advent of modern times. And only two hundred years is all the rest until now, until this moment when my fingers hit little buttons and letters of light show up on my screen. In a moment I will hit another button and these very words will be put up there, somewhere, instantly accessible for the whole world to read.

So how should we imagine the future? How much time will it take us to overcome disease? How much to leave Earth and fly to other planets, or even other star systems? How much to stabilise and heal the Earth's environment? And how much to create the just and peaceful human societies that Gene Roddenberry envisioned in Star Trek?

George Lucas's movie franchise Star Wars avoids references to historical Earth time and has its own timeline, centered around the year 0, the Battle of Yavin. The few years around year 0 are plausibly filled with the stories depicted in the various movies. But as we go back, we find the first historical record being the "Old Republic," which lasted from 25,000-1,000 BBY (before the Battle of Yavin) [5]. A republic lasting 24,000 years? The longest-lasting states on Earth lasted around 2000 years (China and Rome, if judged charitably as continuous states). Assuming Egypt was in existence as a state without interruption from the times of the Old Kingdom (2700 BC to now), it would still have existed only just shy of 4800 years, over which time it would have lost its own language and forgot its own history multiple times.



World population estimate and projection from 10,000 BCE to 2100, by OurWorldInData, from various sources - The population grows from 2.43 million to 10.9 billion people. Source: Wikipedia, Public Domain.

The oldest languages still perfectly understandable today are Hebrew (with writing dating back 3,000 years), and Tamil and Persian (~2,500 years). [4]

The future

Projecting these observations into the future, we must therefore be realistic about the duration of anything that will resemble today's states and other political structures. Not even language and culture survives for more than about 5,000 years, in the best of cases. Assuming change does *not* accelerate in the future, but remains roughly constant, we can expect the world 200 years from now (in about Star Trek times) to look as different from today as today looks different from 1822. Think of the Internet, social media, the political order, the rights of women, colonialism, the progress in medicine, but also the environmental destruction in the past 200 years, and you'll get an idea of roughly how different the world might look like in 200 years' time. We will talk more about the specific changes to be expected in future posts.

If we go for longer periods of time, say 1000 years into the future, then the biggest change will probably have to do with the human population. Here is how it changed in the past:

It's easy to see that if we add another 1000 years to the right of that, the number of people will not be sustainable on planet Earth, no matter how few resources each one of us uses and whether we become vegans or not.

There are a limited number of ways out of this problem of population explosion:

1. We could regulate human procreation globally and over the long run, perhaps in ways similar to the Chinese one-child policy.
2. We could find new planets to colonise. For a while, it will help to colonise Earth's oceans, but in the end, with an exponential population curve like that, every finite container for human beings will overflow. The vastness of space is the only way to survive if we don't want to restrict human reproduction on Earth.

And then, of course, the question becomes even harder: how many suitable planets are out there for us to colonise? And can we reach them?

A fragile world

As we manage to overcome physical distances through both faster communications and transportation, the world shrinks, but not always in a good way. The 20th century saw two World Wars that were worse, more deadly and brutal than any war seen in the thousands of years before. These wouldn't have been possible without the technological advantages that allowed us

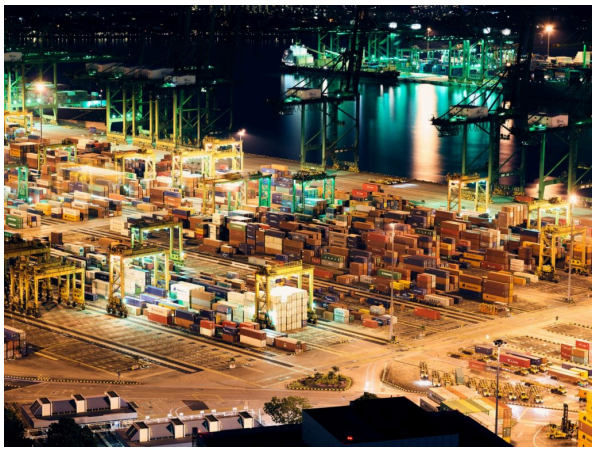


Photo by chuttersnap on Unsplash

to wage wars that cover the planet. The Ebola and coronavirus epidemics, too, show the other, darker side of progress.

Our global networks of transport can not only bring Aunt Suzie from New Zealand to her family in London, but they can also carry deadly pathogens and distribute them all over the planet. There have been deadly viruses in ancient times. A plague killed a quarter of the citizens of ancient Athens, including its leader, Pericles, in 430 BC. The Black Death in 1346-1353 AD killed around half of all people in Europe. But our roads, our airplanes, our cargo ships make it much easier for local outbreaks to become global pandemics.

The world, instead of having become a safer place, has become more fragile, a shiny, intricate mechanism, too complex for its own good.

Much of our food today depends on world-wide networks of supply. Farming and manufacturing at scale means that whole geographical areas, sometimes whole countries, specialise in one crop or one commodity, depending on imports for everything else. When, in 2013, a single memory chip factory in China caught fire, prices for memory chips worldwide went up by 20%. When dry weather hit Latin America in 2019, coffee prices worldwide reached new highs. Oil and natural gas are already firmly in the hand of the countries that produce them, giving these countries the ability to control much of global trade and development, but also to effectively wage war on renewable energy sources and to delay their adoption. And when surgical masks became scarce in the first months of the coronavirus pandemic, it became clear that China produced most of these (and required itself many more than it could produce).

When these networks of transport break down or when the supply of some good cannot keep up, due to viruses, floods, terrorism, wars, droughts, or any other of a million different reasons, we notice how vulnerable our world order has become. We cannot rely on the supermarket at the next street corner to have toilet paper. We cannot rely on anyone to have toilet paper. Suddenly, something as cheap and ubiquitous as toilet paper becomes a valuable, rare thing. Its absence is seen as the first step down from the perceived heights of modern civilisation, down into a barbaric underground world that was always there, patiently waiting for its chance to swallow up our elaborate, costly, unsustainable ways of life.

What's next, then?

On the other hand, there is some kind of long-term stability in human development. The two World Wars were big, impactful events that changed the landscape of politics for the rest of the 20th century, but, if one takes a long-enough view, it's not so clear that they significantly changed human history or human societal development. Would we have modern cities, cars, global trade, computers, the Internet and space

exploration without the World Wars? Probably. Astronauts might be speaking German or Spanish on the ISS, instead of Russian and English, but it's not likely that the grand-scale development of humanity would have changed entirely. The various economic crises are catastrophic in the short term. But, at least until now, they are soon forgotten, with little impact on the fate of mankind in the long run. The atomic bomb brought us the cold war, but even this now seems like a limited episode in human history, an event that extended over some 50 years and later became something for the history books.

So the question really is, will we survive all the problems that we face today in the same cool way like we survived the World Wars? Will the coronavirus leave us roughly were it found us, and will we resume our lives roughly where they were interrupted by the pandemic? Probably. But what about biodiversity loss, climate change, global pollution, the loss of civil freedoms, the rise of AI as a tool of surveillance and domination?

Will these also blow over? Will they be solved in the same way like we solved our past problems, or will they finally get us?

These are tricky, difficult questions. Nobody has any answers. But we can try to make guesses, and our guesses can be better or worse, more or less informed. So let's do that. Come back next week for another dose of the future!

Sources

[1] Link here
[2] Link here
[3] Link here
[4] Link here
[5] Link here

Marcus Aurelius on Opinions

A History of Philosophy in Quotes.

Marcus Aurelius: Meditations

> **It is in our power to have no opinion about a thing, and not to be disturbed in our soul; for things themselves have no natural power to form our judgements.** (Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, Book 6)

Marcus Aelius Aurelius Verus Caesar (121-180 AD) is still one of the most well-known and generally well-regarded emperors of Rome. Read more about him here.

Marcus Aurelius was not only an emperor, but also a philosopher. In a difficult time for Rome and for himself, he turned to philosophy to find strength and guidance. While away from Rome, on military expeditions to the barbarian lands in Central Europe, he kept a diary of his thoughts. This later became known as "Meditations." But the original title is much more modest: "Notes to Myself," or "Things that Concern Myself."

Stoic philosophy is complex and has many facets, but one of its overarching goals is to show a path to human happiness. This happiness comes through cultivating a particular approach to the world that allows us to stay composed and strong in the face of difficulties.

In the quote above, the important concept is things being "in our power" or not. For Stoic philosophers like Marcus Aurelius, it was essential to distinguish between what aspects of our lives and our experience we can control and which things we cannot control. Some of us, for example the Emperor of Rome, might have more control than others, but we all have only limited power to bend the world to our will. Diseases, bad luck, economic collapse, natural disasters and old age spare no one. This is what Mar-

cus Aurelius calls the "things themselves" in the quote above.

If those "things themselves," that is, the unpredictability of the outside world, can throw us into poverty, illness, hardships and death, what can we do to try and safeguard our happiness? Here, the Stoics employ a psychological trick. They say, it is true that an external event creates a factual situation. But the facts are distinct from our judgements about them.

You can see this easily when you look at the misfortune of others. If you see in the news that a house somewhere far away collapsed and killed most of the members of a family, you will perhaps pity these people; but you will not be devastated by the news. You will be more or less indifferent to the plight of these people you don't know.

If, on the other hand, this is *your* house that collapsed, *your* family that was killed, you will certainly have a different reaction.

From this starting observation, the Stoics conclude that what affects our state of mind, as a reaction to the collapse of the house, is not the collapsed house itself; since one collapsed house affects us, but the other does not. It is, rather, the interpretation that our minds give to these events. When *my* house collapses, I make a *judgement* about this event. And this judgement is different from what it would be if the house of a stranger had collapsed.

In the end, therefore, it is these *judgements* that cause our emotional reactions, and not the events themselves.

But now we should also realise, the Stoics say, that any judgements we make are products of our own minds – they entirely take place within our minds. And, because of that, we always have the power to change them. Nobody and nothing can prescribe to me what judgement I should make in response to some external event. With training, we will be able to keep our own judgements under control. We will be able, therefore, to control our own emotions, and consequently to achieve lasting happiness, even in the face of catastrophic events.

"It is in our power to have no opinion about a thing, and not to be disturbed in our soul," Marcus Aurelius writes. And this is because "the things themselves have no natural power to form our judgements." Only we, ourselves, can do that.

Happiness, for the Stoics, is a state of our minds. And therefore entirely in our own control.

What Will Be Left of Us?

Are we the first civilisation on Earth?

Are we the first civilisation on Earth?

There are theories circulating on the Internet on whether ours is the first advanced, technological civilisation to exist on Earth. As we saw last time, the first anatomically modern humans appeared on the planet around 200,000 years ago; while the oldest cave paintings and the first human artefacts we can find go back only 40,000 years. This leaves us with 160,000 years of empty time, in which humans did … nothing. Or did they?

Starting from this thought, we see that our whole history, from the first bone flute to the ISS, fits four times (!) into the dark period before our known history began. In addition, we have shreds of legends of ancient, lost civilisations that are regularly blown up by popular writers: the riddle of Atlantis, the "Gods" of Erich von Daeniken, the mysterious perfection of the pyramids and of paleolithic observatories, the statues of Easter Island, the sunken civilisation of Thera/Santorini, the pyramids of South America and many more mysteries of our ancient past.

All these legends, together with the long time gap, have prompted speculations that perhaps there was, once, another civilisation on Earth. A civilisation that preceded the whole of ours and that was, for some reason, destroyed and lost without (almost) a trace.

Could this be possible?

And, if so, could this happen to our own civilisation?

Assuming our whole world descends into chaos tomorrow as the result of a deadly disease, a meteor strike, or a nuclear war – what would remain of us in the long run? If every human being was suddenly gone, how long would there still be traces of our existence on Earth? A thousand years? A hundred thousand? A million? Forever?

Surprisingly, we know more about this than one might think.

Photo by James Wheeler on Unsplash

Earth Without People

In a 2005 article in Discover Magazine, "Earth Without People,"[3] journalist Alan Weisman asked the question what would happen if we, all humans, suddenly disappeared from the surface of the Earth.

The question is not entirely hypothetical. There are regions on Earth that are, right now, devoid of human activity, but accessible to animals and nature: Chernobyl, the site of the world's worst nuclear accident in 1986. The demilitarised zone that separates North from South Korea. And an ancient stretch of forest between Poland and Belarus that shows how continental European landscapes might look without (too much) human interference.

In all these cases, the surprising find is how quickly nature is able to recover from the damages that human activity has inflicted on it. There are many documentaries on how wildlife is thriving in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. Here is one of them, and you can search in Youtube for more:

https://youtu.be/XaUNhqnpiOE

Weisman predicts that after the disappearance of humans, domesticated species of plants and animals would soon revert to something resembling their original, wild ancestors, who were better equipped to survive in natural environments.

Surprisingly, what to us feels like the most solid and durable products of civilisation, our cities, would not last very long. As one can see when visiting abandoned villages, for example in many places throughout Southern Europe, nature very quickly finds a way into buildings. Windows break in storms or when birds fly against them. Tree seeds enter and grow in the protected, enclosed space. Roots of trees break up the floors, inviting more plants and animals to colonise the interior of houses. Roofs cave in. And, at last, the walls disappear, pushed over by the exploding vegetation inside.

Modern office towers, Weisman says, would not last much more. Rain would seep in from broken windows and failed door seals, slowly eroding the concrete and eventually leading to the collapse of even the sturdiest-looking skyscrapers. Lightning and fire would do their part to reduce artefacts to ash that will blow away in the wind.

It wouldn't take much longer than 20-50 years without maintenance for concrete structures to begin falling apart: subway tunnels, office towers, bridges. Streets would turn into rivers. After only a hundred years, Weisman predicts, forests would re-cover the land, hiding the remains of cities. After 1,000 years, the sturdiest steel bridges would finally collapse and disappear. And at 20,000 years, in the case of New York, glaciers would cover the landscape and scrape the last standing structures off the face of the Earth.

[3] https://www.discovermagazine.com/planet-earth/earth-without-people

20,000 years, then: that's only ten times as long as it took us from the birth of Christ to get to today. Or about as much time as has passed since modern humans first reached Europe.

So if we suddenly disappeared, in about the same time as we took to develop our modern world from nothing, it would have almost completely vanished, replaced by nearly pristine nature. Some monuments, like the US presidents' faces on Mount Rushmore, could in principle survive millions of years, if one considers only the wear from weather. But this ignores the destruction due to glaciers, earthquakes and volcano eruptions, for example, which would probably contribute to a much earlier disappearance of such structures.

The Silurian Hypothesis

Assuming all this was true: Would there then be any reliable way how we could determine whether a really ancient technological civilisation has existed on Earth before we came along?

In 2018, researchers Adam Frank and Gavin Schmidt wrote a paper[4] asking this question. It is not an accident that one of them is an astrophysicist and the other a climate scientist. Astronomers could use a method that is able to reliably detect past life on other planetary bodies. For example, has there ever been an ancient civilisation on Mars? Or how could we detect (present or past) life on remote exoplanets? Is there any kind of observable chemical signature that would give the existence of life away? Or even that of a technological civilisation?

From the abstract of this paper:

> If an industrial civilization had existed on Earth many millions of years prior to our own era, what traces would it have left and would they be detectable today? We summarize the likely geological fingerprint of the Anthropocene, and demonstrate that while clear, it will not differ greatly in many respects from other known events in the geological record. We then propose tests that could plausibly distinguish an industrial cause from an otherwise naturally occurring climate event.

If one goes back only a few thousand years, it is likely that one would still find some artefacts from a previous civilisation. But what if one goes back much longer, so much that even humans have not existed in that past? Could there have been an entirely different civilisation on Earth once? Perhaps one run by intelligent lizards or something like that?

Adam Frank, in an article in The Atlantic, writes:

> When it comes to direct evidence of an industrial civilization – things like cities, factories, and roads – the geologic record doesn't go back past what's called the Quaternary period 2.6 million years ago. For example, the oldest large-scale stretch of ancient surface lies in the Negev Desert. It's "just" 1.8 million years old … Go back much further than the Quaternary, and everything has been turned over and crushed to dust.[5]

[4] https://arxiv.org/abs/1804.03748

[5] Adam Frank (2018): Was There a Civilization on Earth Before Humans? A look at the available evidence. The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2018/04/are-we-earths-only-civilization/557180/

The geological record, the authors conclude, would indeed preserve some evidence of our past existence on Earth. For example, our excessive use of fertilisers would show up as nitrogen-rich sediments even 100 million years into the future. The same would be the case for the rare elements that are contained in our electronic components, and that don't circulate naturally in Earth's environment. Plastics end up in the oceans and decay, but then fall out as a layer of small particles at the ocean floors, where they would remain detectable for very long time periods.

Interestingly, most radioactive elements would not stay around for long enough to be detectable by future scientists in hundreds of millions of years. According to the Frank-Schmidt paper, only Plutonium-244 (half-life 80 million years) and Curium-247 (half-life 15 million years) persist long enough, but these are very rare elements. For a future civilisation to detect them, we would have to "deposit them in sufficient quantities," as the authors note, "as a result of a nuclear weapon exchange." That is, we would have to nuke ourselves out of existence.

One of the most telling and most likely signals for future scientists would be our use of fossil fuels that upsets the balance of carbon isotopes in the atmosphere. And this will be detectable in rocks for a very long time.

If this is the case, the authors ask, can we then detect similar signs in the past geological history of Earth?

Turns out, we can.

In 1991, scientists Kennett and Stott discovered the existence of an abrupt spike in carbon and oxygen isotopes at around 56 million years ago, in what is called the Paleocene/Eocene transition period. In their paper, Frank and Schmidt recount a whole number of other, similar spikes of particular elements and isotopes in Earth's geological history, often associated with an explosion in the carbon concentration in sediments and a global rise in temperatures – in short, exactly the conditions that our technological civilisation is creating right now. They write:

> At least since the Carboniferous (300–350 Ma), there has been sufficient fossil carbon to fuel an industrial civilization comparable to our own and any of these sources could provide the light carbon input.

But then, they also note that in many cases, these carbon spikes coincide with tectonic or volcanic activity during that period. They are, therefore, not reliable indicators of past industrial civilisations.

What about us, then?

The Silurian Hypothesis, which the authors themselves do not believe to be true, asserts that there could have been a past industrial civilisation on Earth, one that we might not be able to now distinguish from other events in the geological record.

As they write[6]:

> There is an interesting paradox in considering the Anthropogenic footprint on a geological timescale. The longer human civilization lasts, the larger the signal one would expect in the

[6] https://arxiv.org/abs/1804.03748

> record. However, the longer a civilization lasts, the more sustainable its practices would need to have become in order to survive. The more sustainable a society (e.g. in energy generation, manufacturing, or agriculture) the smaller the footprint on the rest of the planet. But the smaller the footprint, the less of a signal will be embedded in the geological record. Thus the footprint of civilization might be self-limiting on a relatively short timescale.

This is an interesting conclusion. If we manage to survive our future for a significant period of time, then we'll have found a way to reduce our footprint in such as way as to become undetectable to future civilisations.

There is some comfort in that. Perhaps humanity can find a way to reduce its effect on the environment and to live on this planet in a way that is in harmony with all other life on it.

And if not? Well, personally I find it immensely comforting to look at those Chernobyl documentaries. Even if we blow up nature in the worst possible way, by torching it with radioactive explosions, life itself will likely survive. We can kill ourselves, but we can't kill life on Earth.

And that's a good thing to know. After us, it's not only *le déluge,* but also most probably a new Garden of Eden.

One without us, and better for it.

Photo by James Wheeler on Unsplash.

[1]: Discovery Magazine, link here.
[2]: https://arxiv.org/abs/1804.03748
[3]: Adam Frank (2018): Was There a Civilization on Earth Before Humans? A look at the available evidence. The Atlantic.

Stephen Leach
In Praise of Pyrrhonian Scepticism

> According to the mode deriving from dispute, we find that undecidable dissension about the matter proposed has come about both in ordinary life and among philosophers. Because of this we are not able to choose or to rule out anything, and we end up with suspension of judgement. In the mode deriving from infinite regress, we say that what is brought forward as a source of conviction for the matter proposed itself needs another such source, which itself needs another, and so *ad infinitum*, so that we have no point from which to begin to establish anything, and suspension of judgement follows.

Radical scepticism has a good claim to be both the longest lasting tradition in philosophy and the consistently least popular. There's a lot to be said for it.

By radical scepticism I mean scepticism that is in the grip of an infinite regress, like the 'why?' '…' 'why?' '…' 'why?' … of a child in the process of discovering philosophy — which is also, not coincidentally, the 'why?' '…' 'why?' '…' 'why?' … of a child discovering radical scepticism. In western philosophy this infinite regress is first discussed by Sextus Empiricus (2nd or 3rd century BC).

This passage is from Sextus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, so named after Pyrrho (c.360-270 BC). Although Pyrrho's works do not survive, Sextus thought of himself as a disciple of Pyrrho. For this reason, I shall use the words 'Pyrrhonian scepticism' or 'radical scepticism' to apply to any philosophy that does not escape an infinite regress.

Incidentally, some scholars have pointed out similarities between aspects of early western scepticism (as found in Sextus Empiricus) and the Buddhism that Pyrrho may have encountered when, according to Diogenes Laertius, he

travelled to India in the army of Alexander the Great. However, whether or not Pyrrho and Sextus were influenced by Buddhism, it is not hard to imagine an infinite regress arising independently in the earliest stages of different philosophical traditions in unconnected parts of the world and, indeed — as we will see — this seems to have been the case.

Contemporary philosophers, who will agree with each other on very little else, tend to agree that it is one of the defining characteristics of philosophy that it should examine its own foundations. Thus, for example, philosophers have often pointed out that it is not part of mathematics to ask 'what is mathematics?' and it is not part of natural science to ask 'what is natural science?' However, it is part of philosophy to ask 'what is philosophy?' For philosophy is self-reflective: it looks at its own foundations and asks 'why?' Radical scepticism is this philosophical self-reflection carried to its logical end, or rather its logical inconclusion.

However, the same philosophers who emphasise the self-reflective character of philosophy often have a very negative view of radical scepticism and assume that one of their first duties as philosophers to defeat it. The worry is perhaps that — if we are stuck with the same infinite regress as preoccupied Pyrrho — then scepticism would seem to gainsay any notion of philosophical progress. This was the worry that lay behind Kant's comparison of sceptics to nomadic barbarians, ever threatening to destroy the civilized achievements built up by their non-sceptic colleagues.

The idea that philosophy progresses is an idea that dates to the Enlightenment; and ever since the Enlightenment those philosophers who believe in philosophical progress are often those philosophers who cast envious eyes at natural science [1]. For science, most would agree, does progress. Moreover, as was first pointed out by Pierre Bayle in the late seventeenth century, science, unlike philosophy is unperturbed by radical scepticism.

Yet since radical scepticism still exists, as a live *philosophical* concern — there is no universally agreed method by which it can be vanquished, nor even a commonly agreed method — it is perhaps time to call into question the notion that philosophy does progress (at least in the same manner of natural science).

Another, older, reason for mistrust of radical scepticism is what is seen as its ridiculous impractical unworldliness. This was exemplified in the ancient world in legends about Pyrrho's extreme impracticality. These stories were relished all the more in that Pyrrho and his followers believed that their stance was of practical benefit, providing a guide as to how to live. They believed that suspending judgement about any claim to certain knowledge was conducive to peace of mind, to *ataraxia* (detached serenity).

Few were convinced by Pyrrho's prescription, but — beyond laughter and ridicule — the question of *why* it was intuitively unconvincing was not directly addressed. It was not until the work of David Hume that an answer was implicitly given. Hume pointed out that in our everyday life we are largely reliant on inductive reasoning in which certainty plays no part. Rather we have faith that in some measure the future will resemble the past. The implication, against Pyrrho, is that we do not need to suspend judgement, for unavoidably in much of our everyday decision-making we rely not on deductive reasoning but on faith. (I here set aside questions of the nature and extent of Hume's own scepticism.)

Implicitly, Heidegger also answered the question of why the prescription was unconvincing. He argued that western philosophy (since the pre-Socratics) has, without justification, tended to assume that metaphysics and epistemology comprise the highest branches of the discipline. Pyrrho's prescription for *ataraxia* is a prime example of this. Yes, Pyrrho was concerned with practice but, conforming to Heidegger's thesis, he tended to assume that taking the correct approach in epistemology would act as a starting point to clear away problems in the practical sphere. Herein lies his impracticality.

It may therefore be of interest to see how radical scepticism manifests itself in a philosophical tradition that developed independently of western philosophy and which does not elevate metaphysics and epistemology to the highest level. The following anecdote about the Chinese sceptic Zhuangzi (late 4th century BC) provides an example of radical scepticism within a fundamentally different context.

> Once Zhuangzi dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Zhuanzi. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable Zhuangzi. But he didn't know he was Zhuangzi who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuangzi. Between Zhuangzi and a butterfly there must be *some* distinction! This is called the Transformation of Things. (*Zhuangzi*, §2)

In this story, Zhuangzi has to decide between whether he is more likely to be Zhuangzi or a butterfly. He asks himself what seems to be more *immediately* likely? He does not suspend judgement, as recommended by ancient Greek sceptics; but yet, as is apparent throughout the *Zhuangzi* (the collection of stories about this philosopher), he retains an awareness of his fallibility — an awareness that arises *within* his everyday life. It is this wariness towards certainty, whilst yet accepting the need to make choices, that benefits the everyday life of the sceptical philosopher.

It should, however, be stressed that in Zhuangzi, as much as in Sextus Empiricus, there is the same awareness of scepticism's infinite regress. This is evident in the following conversation related in the *Zhuangzi*.

> Nieh Ch'üeh asked Wang Ni, "Do you know what all things agree in calling right?"
> "How would I know that?" said Wang Ni.
> "Do you know that you don't know it?"
> "How would I know that?"
> "Then do things know nothing?"
> "How would I know that? …" (*Zhuangzi*, §2)

In summary the comparison of radical scepticism in Chinese and western philosophy suggests again that the impracticality of achieving *ataraxia* is not intrinsic to radical scepticism but rather is intrinsic to the impractical elevation of metaphysics and epistemology above all other branches of philosophy.

Having defended radical scepticism from the criticisms that it is an impediment to philosophical progress and that it is ridiculously impracti-

cal, it should, more positively, be said that without any belief in philosophical progress, there is much interesting and useful work that the sceptic is well-equipped to do.

For example, without baggage (without presuppositions) the sceptic may be well equipped to discover the presuppositions underlying both everyday judgements and other disciplines of inquiry. Indeed, without presuppositions the sceptic is less likely than Kant to become entangled in debates about appearance and reality [2]. But although this is useful work, as conducted by the sceptic, it is not an exercise that is progressive in an Enlightened sense — for the sceptic will have no reason to believe that in the future these presuppositions will not change.

Besides Kant, there are a number of other critics of metaphysics (as the study of ultimate reality) who might have benefitted from a starting point of radical scepticism: for example, A.J. Ayer, who argued that there are only two kinds of meaningful statement, those that are true by definition and those that can be verified by experience. Ayer faced the criticism that in making this claim it was unclear as to what foundation he himself was standing on. But if his starting point had been radical scepticism, then instead of being confounded by the question, 'what foundation do you yourself stand on?' he might in good conscience have admitted, 'None, whatsoever. My claim applies only to statements made within inquiries outside of philosophy, but, as for myself, I have no skin in those games.'

Another critic of metaphysics who might have benefitted from embracing scepticism's infinite regress is Richard Rorty. Rorty argued that philosophy's attempt to mirror a mind-independent nature is doomed to failure. (G.H. Lewes put forward a similar argument in the nineteenth century.) Rorty suggested that, with this realisation, philosophy's *raison d'être*, as an autonomous discipline, falls away and as a live concern it falls into desuetude.

But the sceptic might agree with Rorty's criticisms of philosophy's attempts to mirror a mind-independent nature, whilst at the same time pointing out that scepticism's infinite regress remains, untouched by his criticisms.

Therefore, at least one (non-metaphysical) part of philosophy remains — and, whilst philosophy is maximally self-reflective, always will.

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[1] Kant is not usually associated with scientism but I suspect that he may belong to this group, in that there are parallels between his systematic categorising and that of Carl Linnaeus whose achievements were known, at least by reputation, to every educated person at the time.

[2] 'Without the presupposition [of the "thing in itself,"] I was unable to enter into [Kant's] system, but with it I was unable to stay within it' – Jacobi. This seems to be the essence of a great number of subsequent criticisms of Kant. However, the radical sceptic would say nothing of the "thing in itself."

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Cover image: Pixabay.

Epilogue

And that was it, our first monthly, printable magazine. Thank you so much for being part of this experiment, and I hope that you enjoyed it!

I'm also pretty sure that it must have had its problems. If you encountered any, please be so kind to write me, so that I can make this better. Please note that this is just a free, added bonus for subscribers to the Daily Philosophy newsletter, so that it's certainly not as carefully redacted as a real magazine that would be available commercially to the public. I hope that you will therefore not judge it according to the same criteria as a "real" magazine. That said, I'll try to improve it further in the future.

I'm always grateful for your comments, suggestions and criticism!

Thanks again for your support and have a great, thoughtful February!

— Andy

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