What is the Future of Feminism?
Annual Philosophy Lecture 2023

The Good Life in Ancient and Current Philosophy

Guest Speaker: Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek

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We invite any person to submit an article on SHARE. Any subject matter may be dealt with, but articles must be of a philosophical nature, in English and no longer than 1,000-1,500 words. References, if any, are to be placed with the text. It shall be the sole prerogative and responsibility of the Editor to determine which contributions to include or exclude from the magazine. The ideas expressed in the authors’ articles represent their views and may not necessarily reflect or concur with the views of the board members of the Philosophy Sharing Foundation.

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Editorial

The editorial staff of SHARE magazine felt that the time is opportune for a special feature that focuses on the female perspective to show that traditional philosophical concepts shaped by gender could or rather should be challenged. Further than that, SHARE has shown a deep-seated interest on what the future beckons for the feminist movement.

As can be seen from the articles of our nine contributors, the complexities related to feminism are not easy to unravel. Although feminism is commonly associated with the fight against inequality and oppression suffered by women, it has proved to be an evolving concept with a wide range of ideas and objectives that can eventually lead to divergences of opinions and beliefs. Perhaps one of the best approaches to comprehend the concept of feminism is to focus on the four waves or time periods of feminism from the mid-nineteenth century to the second decade of the 21st century.

Perhaps the first wave of feminism can be attributed to Mary Wollstonecraft who was one of the first philosophers to argue in her publication *The Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792, that the intellectual capabilities of women are equal to men. She contended that it is through education that such a gap could be narrowed. By and large, the demands for equal access to education as well as equality in the vote and marriage have been achieved in several countries in the West in the post-war period.

The 1960s, spurred on by the revolutionary climate of that time, brought about the second wave of feminism which focused on the achievement of equality in sexual norms, the control of childbirth, the fight for the legal right to abortion and the criminalisation of any physical assault towards women.

One of the female philosophers who had a huge impact on the second wave of feminism is Simone de Beauvoir. In her article, Natasha Galea explains why Beauvoir’s publication *The Second Sex* published in 1949 always maintains a resonating presence with the feminist movement. Beauvoir’s classic quote ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’ reminds human beings that failure to distinguish between sex as a biology and gender as a social construct is the root cause of oppression inflicted upon women.

Carmen Sammut also credits Simone de Beauvoir as her intellectual heroine who has provided her with the perceptive insight for understanding the struggle for equality on reproductive rights. During the post-independence period, considerable progress was registered in Malta on many fronts with regards to feminism and gender issues. However, Malta still has one of the strictest abortion laws in the world. And what is of added concern is that political polarisation and expediency have been acting as barriers to any reasoned or dispassionate debate on such a divisive issue.

Lara Dimitrijevic seems to concur with this view and believes that the traditional religious culture which values motherhood as the central tenet of women’s’ lives has held up progress on the discussion of abortion in Malta. This phenomenon is still present even though church influence has declined, and Malta has become more secular over the years. However, she believes that the morning after pill and the sharing of experiences by women on the social media will eventually force Maltese society to confront the issue in a more open and realistic perspective.

Incidentally, as reproductive rights have been asserted in most countries of the West during the late 60s and the 70s, the second wave of feminism seems to have lost its tempo during the 1980s as it became weakened by the increasingly conservative climate dominated by the neoliberalism propagated by the Reagan-Thatcherite tandem. Nevertheless, the 80s saw the emergence of black feminism and the idea of intersectionality – a recognition of multiple barriers faced by women of colour which feminism influenced by the domination of white women failed to address. Peter Mayo pays a fitting tribute to a black feminist Gloria Watkins known as bell hooks who died in 2021. She shook the foundations of white feminist politics and stands out for raising awareness on the pain that is suffered from multiple oppressions intersecting through race, gender, and class.

In the early 90s, a third wave of feminism became the driving force that called for the deconstruction of gender norms and in the process gave women more courage to express their sexual behaviour overtly without any fear of degrading or labelling prejudices. Unfortunately, this third wave of feminism was riven by factionalism on many issues such as the causes of violence against women, abortion rights, pornography, transgenderism and whether the capitalist structures of societies could support feminist aspirations.

Within this scenario of the progression of these three waves, the questions asked by Sara Azzopardi as to whether women have truly gained the autonomy they have been demanding, remains pertinent as a topic of discussion. How can women claim to be truly autonomous, Sara Azzopardi argues, if their choices of work, motherhood, and marriage remain guided by fear or by a compromising attitude to be accepted by their male counterparts?

On a similar vein but with a different twist, Suzanne Bonnici Ciantar views a parallel link between the oppression and violence suffered by women and non-human animals. She acutely observes the same use of certain language to
objectify women and animals and justify the violence that is perpetuated for ultimate consumption (in the case of women being sexual while that of animals being physical).

By 2012, a fourth wave of feminism took hold whereby many feminists were making intensive use of the social media and blogging sites to disseminate their ideas and protest discriminatory treatment meted by societies around the world. Of significant impact was the #MeToo movement on Twitter which shamed perpetrators of sexual abuse in Hollywood and many other areas of culture, business, and industry. Once again, a backlash arose against this movement that also included other women who expressed concern that sexual freedom was being endangered.

In her article, Gail Debono was one of the most forceful contributors to emphasise the divisive issues being sowed among feminists themselves throughout the different waves of feminism. She views the future fifth wave of feminism as leading to more vocal calls towards increased representations of women in top positions across many sectors of society. Her concern is that such a direction could create further divisions in society if it is simply a question of gender representation.

Perhaps one possible conciliatory tone for the future of feminism is the article of Fulden İbrahimhakkıoğlu who cites the spiritual activism of Gloria Anzaldúa to rethink certain feminist concepts through the healing perspective. Fulden İbrahimhakkıoğlu views the future of feminism not just as a journey toward the achievement of equality and justice for all types of gender but rather a means to ensure the flourishing of the human species through the practices of self and community care.

Concluding on the future of feminism, Sam Sultana rightly points out in his article that Plato was ahead of his times when he asserted that women are capable just as men in leading the ideal city state. For Plato, it is the soul’s excellence not the body that defines the place and role of human beings in society.

May the fifth wave of feminism come on and reaches such an aspiration!

**Summary of other articles**

Sophie Loidolt, Professor of Philosophy from the Technical University of Darmstadt is interviewed by Ian Rizzo on phenomenology, ethics, truth, and freedom that are of strong research interest in her line of work. She will be the keynote speaker of the conference ‘Confronting Ethics’ organised by the Department of Philosophy of the University of Malta on the 17th and 18th November 2022.

David Vella seeks to present a model story based on Simon Critchley’s philosophy of conscience for the recognition of the authentic self that is actively committed to other persons and societal institutions. He argues that conscience can recognise the authentic self if it is seen as an event of provocation, stimulation, and empowerment.

Matt Qvortrup offers a perceptive insight on Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Though regarded by many as an existentialist, Kierkegaard was uncompromising in his beliefs. His oft cited credos in his works encourage humans to live for passion and in accordance with their subjective truth rather than in conformity with human conventions.

Luke Fenech explores how Michel Foucault observed certain insights from the Stoics in perceiving philosophy as a self-transformative exercise. Although Foucault was not a Stoic and never endorsed Stoicism, Foucault’s interest in late Stoicism helped him understand the historical development notions of subjectivity, ethics, and philosophy as a way of life.

Luc de Brabandere helps us appreciate the role of ancient Greece in highlighting our European history and the foundation of culture and Western philosophy. While Plato and Aristotle created a frame of thought that maintained its dominance for two thousand years, ancient Greece provided the platform for the origins of history, theatre, and chemistry.

Niki Young provides a book review of Marija Grech’s publication ‘Spectrality and Survivance: Living the Anthropocene’. The review views the publication as an original work that brings Derrida’s thought to bear on the contemporary discourse surrounding the notion of the Anthropocene.

Ian Rizzo continues the fourth series of the Foundation’s Manifesto with the focus this time being on politics. The manifesto attempts to reconcile the political ideologies that cut across the divergent beliefs prevalent in the political spectrum.

Hayley Bonnici argues that all types of dances are activities that can reveal the truths about ourselves, the universe, and a guide on how we should live.
Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) is mostly known for her work *The Second Sex* (1949). This work was highly controversial in her time; however, it is now considered to be one of the most influential feminist works of the twentieth century. Even though Beauvoir did not intend the work to be about feminism, it had a significant impact on the feminist movement and her work is considered to have led to second wave feminism. Once Beauvoir saw the impact of her work, she adopted the ‘feminist’ label in 1972 and took on an active role in the movement.

Before her *magnum opus*, Beauvoir made significant contributions to ethical theory that provided the very foundation for *The Second Sex*. As a philosopher, Beauvoir was part of the existentialist movement in France. Like Sartre, she believed that freedom was central to human existence. Sartre’s main premise that ‘existence precedes essence’ implies that we do not have a predetermined essence and instead we have the freedom to shape and give meaning to our lives. This idea of absolute freedom, meant for Sartre, that whatever our situation, it cannot restrict our freedom because we can always act and change our situation. Beauvoir disagreed. She realised that by being a woman she faced constraints to her freedom and could not experience the world as freely as men did. For Beauvoir, our facticity – the social class we are born in, the family we have, the education that we receive – influences how we exercise our freedom. In the case of women, the body we are born in also influences our freedom. Thus, it is not only a question of being ontologically free as Sartre believed. In response to this idea of absolute freedom, Beauvoir introduced the idea of moral freedom. Moral freedom is how we respond to our ontological freedom by accepting it and the responsibility it entails – by willing ourselves free. On the other hand, being ontologically free is always a given whether we choose to be free or not. Thus, while we are always ontologically free, we are not always morally free. Beauvoir introduces this idea in her existentialist ethics to account for how our situation and our facticity have a bearing on our freedom.

In traditional western philosophy, there has been a tendency of viewing the body as a hindrance, while reason was considered as a superior faculty that should be in control of our bodily needs and desires. For Beauvoir, since we experience the world and our freedom through our bodies, the body cannot be ignored. She introduces the idea of ambiguity to bring together these two opposing poles. She argues that as human beings, our existence is ambiguous because we are both subject and object, mind and body, free and constrained. Beauvoir views ambiguity as the essential feature of human existence and it is only by embracing our ambiguity that we can live authentically.

A crucial factor to living authentically and exercising our moral freedom is the freedom of others. Beauvoir argues that ‘no existence can be validly fulfilled if it is limited to itself’ (Beauvoir, 1948, p. 72). The freedom of others is necessary to our freedom because in isolation our freedom would be meaningless. Consequently, we have the moral responsibility towards promoting and defending the freedom of others. Beauvoir argues that we must actively participate and fight for the liberation of those who are facing constraints in exercising their freedom. This is what she was doing in writing *The Second Sex*. Therefore, it is not only my freedom that I need to cultivate but also that of others.
In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir links her views on moral freedom to the situation of women. In a similar vein to Sartre’s idea of ‘bad faith’, she argues that one might try to avoid or escape this freedom and responsibility, while others are denied their freedom because they are oppressed. Oppression is the result of one person denying the freedom of another by denying their ambiguity, that is by denying their subjectivity, and making them objects. Beauvoir gives a few examples of how groups of people have been oppressed throughout history, but in *The Second Sex* she focuses on the oppression of women. She points out that women’s oppression is different from oppression in other groups. Oppression is usually the result of one of two situations – it is either a minority group being dominated by a majority, or there is a historical event that results in a group of people to be dominated by the majority. However, in the case of women, neither of these two situations is the case. Furthermore, women are sometimes complicit in their own oppression. This is what Beauvoir attempts to understand in *The Second Sex*. She tries to understand how women are oppressed by first attempting to answer the question – What is woman?

*The Second Sex* is divided into two volumes. In the first part, entitled ‘Destiny’, Beauvoir traces the history of women’s oppression to try to pinpoint where or what it stems from. She provides very detailed research into areas such as biology, anthropology, psychology and concludes that nothing justifies the subordination of women. In the biology section, Beauvoir rejects biological determinism and argues that being a woman is not a fixed essence. She points out that even though biological differences cannot be ignored as they are a necessary element of women’s situation – it is through our bodies that we experience the world – at the same time, she argues that biology is not ‘a fixed destiny’ (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 44). What she means is that biological differences between men and women do not account for the subordination and oppression of women. Thus, it is not biology or nature that makes women inferior to men.

This leads Beauvoir to make an important distinction in *The Second Sex* between ‘female’ and ‘woman’. She argues that although these two terms are used interchangeably, they do not have the same meaning. She points out that sometimes individuals who are biologically female are said to ‘not be women enough’. Others are encouraged to behave and act more like women. This implies, she argues, that ‘not every female human being is necessarily a woman’ (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 3). Beauvoir maintains that being a woman is not something that is tied to nature or biology. Woman is ‘her total situation’ (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 3), that is, what it means to exist as a woman. Thus, while the body is an important element to understanding woman, it does not define her. So where does the idea of ‘woman’ come from?

In the section on myths and literature, it becomes evident that this idea of the myth of the ‘eternal feminine’ has been ingrained into our consciousness for so long that we come to perceive it as the norm. These myths have been written by men and from the point of view of men and consequently, ‘man’ is set as the standard against which ‘woman’ is defined. As a result, women are viewed and defined as different from, or inferior to men. For instance, the story of Adam and Eve is the ultimate example of woman as being created for man and not having an autonomous existence. Beauvoir mentions several myths associated with women with regards to virginity, menstruation, sex, evil, and so on. These myths preserve this idea of woman as subordinate to man. As Kirkpatrick points out, the idea of the ‘feminine’ is not a natural or biological fact but rather a ‘situation created by civilizations’ (Kirkpatrick, 2019, p. 222). Beauvoir gives numerous examples of how these
myths are instilled in us from birth. From a very young age, girls are taught to sit pretty, wear dresses and not climb trees, while boys are encouraged to be strong and not to cry because it makes them look weak. This maintains this idea of oppression. Even though today, women can choose their own paths, get an education, have a career, it is still very difficult to shake off these myths. Beauvoir argues that the woman ‘has a harder time than the young man in accomplishing herself as an autonomous individual... afraid of missing her destiny as a woman’ (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 381). Women are still expected to have a husband and children, in addition to their careers. If they choose not to, they are perceived as not fulfilling their destiny as a woman and might even feel it themselves. This feeling of missing out or of sacrificing one part of their life for another is the result of the expectations that are imposed on women. A man would never have to make such a choice. Women strive to live up to this feminine ideal because through these myths they are aware of what is expected of them. This is how they are complicit in their own oppression.

This is what leads Beauvoir to state that ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, woman’ (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 283). Being a woman is a social construct. Beauvoir is credited for being the first to make this distinction between sex as biology and gender as a social construct. This is where the cause of oppression can be found. As a result of this oppression, women are unable to exercise their freedom. For Beauvoir, the solution is that the situation of women must change, and this must be done on an individual and a societal level. It is important that women are aware of their situation, and they strive for the liberation not only of themselves but also of other women. Men must recognise their role in this oppression and work towards the freedom of the oppressed. Following Beauvoir’s idea of moral freedom, neither men nor women can be morally free unless everyone works towards the liberation of others.

The Second Sex had a considerable impact on second wave feminism because through the personal experiences of women, it raised awareness about how women are treated and viewed in both society and the home. Even though there has been progress, current events across the world with regards to women’s rights reveal that women are still being reduced to their bodies. Feminism in the 21st century can grow stronger through embracing Beauvoir’s ideas in order to move away from these issues and start to truly move forward. More than 70 years from its inception, The Second Sex can still make a significant contribution to the feminist movement today.

References


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On Reading Beauvoir: Reproductive Rights as Citizen Rights and the Case of Malta

By Carmen Sammut

Introduction: Baptism in feminism

I did not encounter Simone de Beauvoir during a philosophy lecture. She became my intellectual heroine during a difficult and solitary personal trajectory. Her book *Le Deuxième Sexe* (*The Second Sex*) reached me 40 years after it was first published in France, at a time when philosophy still undervalued her significance (SEP, 2020). *The Second Sex* was researched and written between 1946 and 1949. A few years earlier, Marie-Louise Giraud became the last French woman to be guillotined for abortion¹ and with *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir emerged as a leading public intellectual and activist on reproductive rights (Monteil, 2008). In the process she became a leading figure who inspired ‘second-wave feminism’, which prioritised abortion as a right.

Beauvoir’s intellectual advocacy inspired transformative action. In 1971, at a time when abortion was illegal and punishable by imprisonment, she joined another 343 prominent women who publicly declared that they had an abortion in the ‘Manifesto of the 343’². Later she testified as a character witness in the Bobigny trial of Marie-Claire Chevalier, a 16 year old high school girl who underwent abortion after she was raped and became pregnant. Her case served as a catalyst for the decriminalisation of abortion in France.

When I familiarised with her body of work in the early 1980s, I was a Maltese girl fraught with limited prospects for her gender and class. I was enthralled by this epic narrative written by a woman in search of herself. My reading of Beauvoir might have been undeveloped and immature, but she provided a thoughtful glimpse into ‘herstory’ and answered some of my own existential predicaments. She spoke to me clearer than American authors like Kate Millett.

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¹ She was executed by the Vichy Government on 30 July 1943.
² She signed the Manifesto even though she later told her biographer that she herself had never underwent an abortion (Bair, 1990). In it they claimed that without legal access to abortion, women could not be full citizens of France and that abortion was a basic prerequisite to free society (McLugh, 2018).
and Betty Friedan or the Australian feminist-turned-polemicist Germaine Greer.

This article will not go anywhere near the complex discussions on Beauvoir’s views on what it means to be a woman, which are now subject to long debates in the discipline (example Shabot, 2007) but it will focus on her epistemic agency, in particular her advocacy on Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (hereinafter SRHRs) which have partly shaped my own views on the matter.

Then, the French feminist philosopher’s proclamation that “a woman is not born but made” was a revelation. Her exploration of women’s “otherness” resonated with my concerns as a young person struggling with countless limitations. She was a public intellectual/activist and hence a role model. Until the 1980s, calls for social transformation in Malta were few and far between. In the absence of a strong grassroots movement, uncoordinated calls for equality emanated mostly from feminist women who put their views across in newspapers and broadcasting, even when media outlets were overwhelmed by intensely polarised agendas in a setting where secularisation and democratisation arrived later than the rest of mainland Europe.

The Second Sex and the waves of feminism

At the time when The Second Sex was published, Maltese women lived in a parallel universe and were still demanding suffrage within a colonial context. Enfranchisement was enacted in 1947. For the decades that followed, developmental concerns overshadowed the rise of the human rights morality (Perry, 2020) that impacted the philosophy, legal implications, and practical politics of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). One of the fundamental rights mentioned in the Declaration placed women on an equal footing with men.

In spite of women’s key role during World War II, from 1944 onwards, the newspaper of the Catholic Action Movement Lepen is-Sewwa reinforced the Church’s intense resentment against the notions of “equal rights” for women and “women’s emancipation”. Reproductive matters remained a taboo.

St Augustine’s proclamation that ‘any woman who acts in such a way that she cannot give birth to as many children as she is capable of, makes her guilty of that many murders, just as with the woman who tries to injure herself after conception’ (Beauvoir, 1974, p. 133) was the prevalent perspective in the post-war period and it was endorsed by the devout women who raised me, i.e., my mother and grandmother.

When I read The Second Sex, the issues raised by second wave feminists were hardly ever mentioned on the Maltese islands; instead, the populist theologies of fire and brimstone still prevailed. Broadly, sex, reproduction and gender relations had remained under the influence of Catholic teachings, the power of the confessional and a flock of morality advisers. So, while in Europe, Beauvoir’s book appeared to challenge patriarchal male-dominated institutions and a plethora of related cultural traditions, in Malta, the Church was still offering the toughest opposition to women’s suffrage.

Beauvoir’s historical narrative served as an eyeopener for some of us. Under Roman Law abortion was not outlawed, she wrote. It was Christianity that revolutionized moral ideas by endowing the embryo with a soul. Ecclesiastical law developed alongside debates as to when the soul essentially enters the body of the foetus\(^3\). Then in the nineteenth century, abortion became ‘a crime against the state’.

The legalisation of abortion in France came under Health Minister Simone Veil, the first woman to hold that office. Later, in 1979, Veil became the first President of the European Parliament and moved the “Simone Veil Pact” which puts equality between women and men at the heart of the European project. Signatories of the Pact support feminist principles that include “Sexual and reproductive rights ... [which] guarantee women’s access to contraception and abortion, as well as to information and education”\(^4\). The Veil Pact is influential Europe-wide but not in Malta, which requested a specific protocol on abortion in its accession treaty pre-2004 (Camilleri, 2009). It is interesting to note that in 2022 the newly appointed President of the European Parliament Roberta Metsola, a Maltese national who is also the third woman in this high-profile European chair, supported the ‘Veil Pact’ after years during which both as a national politician and Member of the European Parliament, she took pronounced anti-abortion positions (The Malta Independent, 2022). Her change of heart was clearly an act of political expediency, as discussed later.

Malta remains the only country with a total ban on abortion. In fact, it has one of the strictest abortion laws in the world, even though by 1968, non-binding “reproductive rights” had already emerged as a subset of rights at the United Nation’s International Conference on Human Rights. Advocacy for women’s sexual, gynaecological and mental health increased

\(^3\) Beauvoir referred to St Thomas who set the time of animation at about the fortieth day for males and the eightieth day for females.

\(^4\) https://www.simoneveilpact.eu
during the Decade of Women between 1975 and 1985 when SRHRs approached the status of soft law in international law. Malta is among the countries that never endorsed them. In effect it has never updated its abortion laws since the mid-1850s.

For feminist theory, the Maltese case alerts us that it is rather misleading to map the trajectory of women’s movements into four “waves” which neatly explain a unilinear timeline for social and cultural evolution. As Agathanelou and Turcotte (2010) noted, historical developments related to women’s advancement are influenced by several variables. Some of the notions that are associated with the second-wave feminism, like abortion, are only emerging in in the third decade of the second millennium, even when other gender and diversity objectives were already entrenched in Maltese law.

Social media disruptions and reproductive rights

In Malta, abortion was (and is) a very divisive issue and so it was traditionally relegated to the back burner. The rise of digital platforms brought new freedoms and the debate on SRHRs is now a common theme in the public sphere to an extent that Politico declared that “abortion debate in Malta went mainstream” (Deutsch, 2019). This was partly due to the establishment of a pro-choice movement in 2019. Civil society activists and social media platforms are permitting a debate that defies the traditional code of silence.

A clear example is the closed Facebook group Women for Women (Malta) that provides a safe space for women to “discuss all women’s issues ... [and] create awareness on the many injustices still suffered today by many women”⁵. The group endeavours to empower women and it has 48,000 members; probably a bigger readership/audience than some of the legacy media.

Pro-choice activists, such as Women’s Rights Foundation⁶, are now better able to network; to express their concerns and to speak about women’s lived experience. The personal is getting more and more political and civil society plays a role to mediate between individuals and the state. Women are also forming alliances with sympathetic male multipliers to create an emerging critical mass on this issue. Surely, the prevailing narrative is no longer manipulated by traditional institutions, and this might present opportunities for change. Until recently anti-abortion arguments were purely religious-oriented, but these days reproductive rights, bioethics and medico-legal matters are emerging to the forefront. This defies a tradition where reproductive issues were merely presented in the media from a Catholic lens.

But contemporary debates are still embedded in a context where indoctrination runs deeper than the influence of organised religion. If we take education, for decades, generations of schoolgirls were subjected to antiabortionist perspectives via viewings of the controversial documentary ‘The Silent Scream’⁷. Viewings in schools took place without parental consent. Adolescent girls were exposed to scenes of shredded developed foetuses even before they received basic sexual education. Those viewings marked some women for life and Malta always had an extraordinarily high percentage of teenage pregnancies, where girls were forced to give birth long before they were ready. Some eventually led contented lives, but some others suffered a lifetime of consequences.

Doctors who help women do so at their own risk. The case of Dr Vincent Moran sent out warning signs for medics and probably reinforced the culture of silence within the political class. Moran, a former Health Minister, who was a family doctor by profession, had a long and successful political career, which came to an abrupt end in 1995 because of an entrapment. A journalist posed as a patient who sought abortion advice and the Church-owned newspaper Il-Ġens revealed that Moran gave advice to whoever sought such information. Subsequently, Moran was asked to resign from the Labour Party because he suddenly became a liability for its electoral chances (Cocks, 2018).

In spite of the cultural onslaught and criminal law, behind everybody’s back, we knew of friends or acquaintances who decided to resort to procedures in UK, Italy or elsewhere in Europe and then went on with their lives. Some of these had happy families ... when they were ready for them. Still, we will never know how many other women ended pregnancies in risky backstreet abortions.

It has been argued that Maltese women are terminating pregnancies almost at the same rate as others in Europe (Cacopardo cited by Iversen, 2018). According to Caruana-Finkel (2002), estimates suggest that “over 500 women in Malta access abortions each year. Many travel to a country with abortion access, but this depends on factors such as financial means and mobility. Another safe – albeit illegal – way to access abortion from Malta is through the online purchase of medical abortion pills (mifepristone and misoprostol) from reputable organisations such as Women Help Women and Women on Web” (p.54).

⁵ https://www.facebook.com/groups/womenforwomenmalta/about
⁶ https://www.wrf.org.mt/about
⁷ The Silent Scream (1984) is anti-abortion film directed by Jack Duane Dabner, and produced in partnership with the biggest US anti-abortion organization, the National Right to Life Committee.
Abortion still stirs emotional responses to an extent that many women find it difficult to discuss SRHRs in a rational way. And so are many men. Those of us irked by this state of affairs still preferred to keep their silence knowing full well that if they openly defy the traditional hymn-sheet, they would be met by an army of rather aggressive hallowers. And when it came to women’s struggles, there were so many issues that mattered that one needed to prioritize and chose one’s battles.

A mother’s life in danger: The case of Andrea Prudente

A 2019 poll confirmed prior research that it is merely 9.2% of the population that supports the decriminalisation of abortion. However, 37.4% were inclined to support the legalisation of abortion in case the mother’s life was in danger and 20.2% if the foetus shows signs that the child would suffer severe disabilities (Sansone, 2019). Pro-choice advocates know that these two issues are the key to public support.

In mid-June 2022, Andrea Prudente presented a very strong case for pro-choice activists. She was 16 weeks pregnant whilst on holiday in Malta. In the face of complications, she was refused an abortion even though she was having a miscarriage and risked a serious infection. She was eventually flown to the island of Mallorca in Spain, where her pregnancy was medically terminated (The Guardian, 2022).

Pro-choice activists were quick to remind us that it was a similar complication that ended the life of Savita Halappanavar, aged 31, in Ireland ten years ago (Specia, 2018). Halappanavar was 17 weeks pregnant and went for help in a Galway hospital because of a miscarriage. However, the foetus still had a detectable heartbeat and hence was protected by law. Doctors did not intervene to save the mother. So, she was admitted to the hospital for pain management while awaiting the miscarriage to progress naturally. Doctors refused to intervene even when her pain increased with signs of infection. She struck the world headlines when she begged for a termination on the grounds of health risk, but this was denied. Halappanavar died suffering from an infection in her uterus that had spread to her blood and caused her organs to fail. This was the case that ultimately brought legal abortion to Catholic Ireland.

Unlike Ireland, Malta has luckily resisted attempts to entrench the right of the life of the unborn in the Constitution. It is very hard to retract Constitutional legislation that requires a two-third majority. Yet, Malta has one of the most restrictive laws that exist in countries where abortion is still illegal. Termination is not accepted in the case of rape; a problem that was partly assuaged with the introduction of the Morning-After Pill (emergency contraception) available since December 2016. Nor when the woman is mentally distressed to an extent that she risks committing suicide.

Maltese doctors do their utmost to save the life of the mother if her life is threatened, but a doctor’s decision might open him/her up to liabilities. A historic private member’s bill to decriminalise abortion was filed in parliament by independent MP Marlene Farrugia in May 2021 (Martin, 2021). This was a commendable move but not a timely step because it came too late, too close to an impending election. Since it is a controversial and divisive theme it was very clear that there was no time and no political appetite for it before the end of the 13th legislature. In the aftermath of Prudente’s case, 135 doctors signed a judicial protest asking for a review of Malta’s abortion ban stating that ‘criminalisation impacts medics’ work, women’s mental and physical health’ (Carabott, 2022).

But where were the current women parliamentarians in all this? Women are not a homogeneous group, and this will remain a divisive issue among the 22 women parliamentarians that took their oath in April 2022*. One would expect them to assert their positions within the parties and to find support from male allies, but this has not yet happened. While this silence is not surprising, women’s NGOs are right to point out that they expect at least some of the women parliamentarians to represent their views. These lobbies now include a strong segment that is seeking a recognition of SRHRs.

Conclusion: Overcoming polarisation and political expediency

While church influence seems to be waning, it is polarisation and political expediency that serve as the main barriers to reasoned debates on abortion in contemporary Malta. Hence, as they strive to improve their chances of being elected, politicians often ride on the wave of public hostility, instead of representing a small number of women who may need terminations. Politicians seem to be more prone to support reproductive rights when they approach the end of their political career or when they have ambitions to play a role in European institutions. The case of Roberta Metsola’s change of heart is a case in point. The former leaders of the

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* Women constitute 29% of the House of Representatives, up from 14%, following a Gender Balance Reform introduced in the General Election of 2022.
Labour Party, Alfred Sant⁹ and Joseph Muscat,¹⁰ have both declared they feel it is time for change; but both are no longer able to drive the change. Some political exponents have put their necks out, but they are a minority. Hence, the struggle is left in the hands of civil society actors, who advocate on a matter that tends to fuel hatred and anger.

There is hope only if there is good political will. In the recent past, unpopular liberal changes that were opposed by Catholic teachings, were introduced seemingly without a significant popular backlash. For instance, divorce was introduced after a referendum that took place on May 28, 2011. Malta is at the top among 49 countries on the ILGA-Europe’s Rainbow Index, a ranking on LGBTQI related policies. Same-sex couples have equal marriage and adoption rights. Malta is at the forefront with IVF law that was introduced and improved after a prolonged discussion on bio-ethical matters. Still, with exceptions, most politicians either oppose abortion or they keep their silence lest the discussion impacts their electoral chances.

The Maltese controversy around the case of Prudente in June 2022 coincided with the global uproar in response to the decision to reverse Roe v. Wade that stripped the legal right of many women to obtain an abortion legally in the United States. As European leaders voiced their dismay about the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision, the anti-abortion movement in Malta cited it as an affirmation of their mission. It is interesting to note that Maltese anti-abortion activists refer to the ‘gift of life’ and ‘sanctity-of-life’ arguments that are prevalent in the Anglo-American debates and these arguments were also employed in the process of the reversal of the Roe v. Wade by the American Supreme Court. Undoubtedly, Prudente’s case triggered a wave of international reactions that put some wind in the sails of the Maltese pro-choice movement. This is introducing a feminist lens to previously un-problematised topics.

Some of the concerns that were raised by Beauvoir in the post-war period are finally reaching the public sphere in Malta. These include the intersections of reproduction and sexuality with class, disability, race, sex work and human trafficking. Personal issues are increasingly becoming national issues as equity, diversity, and inclusion gain ground on the European agenda and on the international stage. But challenges and opposition to feminism are also growing in the face of populist ideologies. There needs to be better reflexivity and more bridge-building so that feminism remains the philosophy that fosters understanding and transformative action.

References


⁹ Sant (2020) wrote a public Facebook appeal: “It is time for an open debate on abortion away from the tired and repetitive arguments we have been exposed to for years” (20 September).

¹⁰ Muscat stated that “the state should not be interfering with one’s decision on abortion and it should be up to the mother to decide” (Vella, 2022).


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Introduction

Feminism is no new concept and has been pivotal in ascertaining women’s rights. Feminist advocates have strived and ensured that women have the right to vote, equality at the workplace, access to educational opportunities, to name but a few. Feminism is the strive to break the patriarchal chains that can be achieved by looking into paid work, household production, culture, sexuality, violence, and politics (Wallaby, 1991). Of course, one cannot talk about feminism without discussing the role it has had in achieving women’s rights to access abortion care (Callie, 2002).

Female philosophers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Mary Wollstonecraft are the key to understanding the historic origins of the feminist movements. However, there are other feminist philosophers that merit mentioning in the discourse surrounding access to abortion care, including Judith Jarvis Thomson, Alison M. Jagger, Susan Sherwin, and Sally Markowitz, to name but a few.

This article will focus into looking how the feminist movement has framed the abortion debate, from the 1960s to date, at both a global and a local level. Whilst acknowledging that this is a philosophy publication, I have since moved on from my philosophy years. So, I will try to tie my arguments with feminist scholarly thinking. Most of this article is based on my personal experience, knowledge, and views.

Abortion debate within the feminist movement

Prior to looking into the formation of the abortion debate, it is important to understand the different eras of the feminist movement.

We often hear about first and second wave feminism, but four waves have been recognised so far. Some say that feminist roots date back to ancient Greece with Sappho (630 BC - 570 BC), Hildegard of Bingen (1098 - 1179) and Christine de Pizan (1364 - 1430) in the Middle Ages, as well as Olympe de Gouges (1748 - 1791), Mary Wollstonecraft (1759 - 1797) and Jane Austin (1775 - 1817) (Rampton, 2015). The first wave of feminism emerges from the urban industrial era, predominantly being upper class, with the suffragettes’ seeing women and men rally for women’s equality.
Second wave feminism, dates to the 1960s, seeing the rise of organisations formed solely by women. This wave was more theoretical focusing on broader issues such as patriarchy, capitalism, the role of women versus the role of mothers, sex, and gender. On the other hand, the third wave took the approach of lipstick, high heels and exposed cleavage as an aspect that was shied upon by the first two movements, seeing discourse as not dependent upon the initial drive of feminism any longer. The fourth wave feminists embraced the term ‘feminism’ and viewed themselves as the reincarnation of their second wave sisters, whilst challenging the arguments raised by third wave feminists. Discourse related to intersectionality, oppression, classism and sexual orientation became important notions. We witnessed the rise of the ‘Me too’ movement and a resurgence of attack on women’s rights.

The abortion debate can be said to have commenced during the second wave of feminism. The activism and perseverance of second wave feminists led to the decriminalisation and legalisation of abortion care with legal victories such as of Roe v. Wade in the United States and other countries following suit, recognising that access to abortion is a women’s rights allowing access upon choice.

Within the feminist philosophical sphere, women’s rights, and abortion have also garnered attention and discussion following the second wave feminist movement. Philosophical thinking has come a long way, and in my opinion, feminist philosophical thinking has been a breath of fresh air when compared to their previous male philosopher counterparts that viewed women as ‘mutilated males’ (Aristotle) and ‘temple built on sewars’ (Tertullian).

Judith Jarvis Thompson’s ‘A Defence of Abortion’ and her “famous violinist” analogy framed the abortion rights argument in terms of bodily autonomy (I will refer to her later). Others, like Susan Sherwin, in her publication ‘Abortion Through a Feminist Ethics Lens’, framed it in terms of patriarchal structural obstacles women are facing. There, she explains the difficulties that women encounter when they fall pregnant, from being unwell to having to give up their jobs, education, and careers. She goes on to say that “Women who feel “too young, too old, or who are unable to maintain lasting relationships may recognize that they will not be able to care properly for a child at this time” (1991, p. 345), and whilst some manage, others would be forced to become mothers and “exacerbate the social and economic forces already stacked against her by virtue of her sex” possibly making her to “become dependent on men,” possibly for the rest of her life (1991, p.345).

Such arguments can be seen to be recurring, particularly in view of the recent anti-feminist backlash. With the uprising of far-right political ideology and neo-liberalist thinking, we see a movement towards anti-gender mobilisation (Datta, 2018). There has been a backlash against ratification of international treaties protecting women’s rights such as the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Turkey and the reversal of Roe v. Wade and its aftermath in the United States. Women’s rights, including sexual and reproductive health, and minority rights including LGBTQI, are so easily dispensed with, in the name of traditional values and patriarchy.

The abortion debate in Malta

It can be claimed that the abortion debate has only recently taken ground. Although there was some talk about abortion back in the early 1980s, the discussion did not go beyond some odd comments in the local newspapers. The discussion back then, was also raised by the Nisa Laburisti that had called upon the Prime Minister to pardon women that take recourse to abortion.

Fast forward thirty years later, and the discussion has been revived particularly after the call for the licensing of the morning after pill (MAP). Although not the remit of this article, it is worth sharing a few observations on how the call for the introduction of the MAP came about locally. Social media and the internet have without a doubt created a space for people to come together, discuss and share ideas and feelings and provide a sense of solidarity. The closed group Facebook page ‘Women for Women’, which at present has 48,000 female members, initiated discussion about female contraception, and the lack of availability of this form of contraception. This led to the snowball effect of women solidarity. Through the support of the Women’s Rights Foundation (WRF), legal action was taken calling for the availability and accessibility of MAP within local pharmacies.

Subsequently, discussion about Malta’s total ban on abortion care has not ceased and continues to be on the national discourse at least within the social media fora. But prior to expanding the current discussion, it would be worth exploring the reasons why Malta continues to have a total ban attitude towards abortion care.

The value of motherhood in Malta has been central in women’s lives. In every nook, it is common to see a Catholic statue of the Holy Mary holding baby Jesus (Dibben, 2016). Several churches are dedicated to Holy Mary and many village feasts are celebrated in her name. On an island that for centuries has been insular and conquered, religion, particularly the Roman Catholic faith, has become part of the national identity. And although the church does not hold the power that it held in the past, its traditions still form part of the Maltese traditional culture.
Nevertheless, this is not stopping women and girls from accessing abortion care. Recent polls indicate that there is a shift in opinions towards abortion with age groups between 18 to 35 indicating an absolute majority who do not support prison sentences for women terminating pregnancies (Vella, 2021). Furthermore, more women are coming forward to share their abortion stories and be less fearful with sharing their opinions. The difficulties that Sherwin talks about in her publication are the same structural difficulties that women and girls in Malta (and globally) continue to experience on a regular basis.

And that leads one obvious conclusion: Feminism, as a philosophy and as a line of thought, does not come out of either way. Feminist origins and concerns are firmly based on experiences of lived lives of women and their stories, in history and in the now. Like any other schools of thought, there are also different schools of feminism with different approaches to reasoning, logic, and ethics. Yet, the main concern remains the same: how can we actively improve the lives of women? That is why feminist thought drives its power from activism, by working with women from the ground and listening to what they have to say.

And when it comes to abortion rights (and here I am referring back to Judith Jarvis Thompson), the same applies. The “debate” does not exist in a vacuum. It is being driven over women’s bodies, their lives, health, social and psychological wellbeing. In no other sphere of life can we force someone to donate their body for the sake of others. Even if we accept that an embryo or a foetus can have some and/or all rights of a person, those rights will always be trumped by the rights of a woman to her bodily autonomy. We cannot force people to donate blood even if that would save other people’s lives. We cannot force anyone to donate their kidney, piece of their liver or lungs to save someone’s life, yet in abortion “debate” we can. We cannot even use the organs of already dead persons without their prior explicit consent, yet when it comes to abortion the state can force woman to carry on with their pregnancy against their will. Imagine that; in places with abortion bans like Malta, a cadaver has more rights than a living, breathing human being – a woman.

Until this situation changes, until all women everywhere are seen as equal and independent human beings, the struggle continues.

References


Lara Dimitrijevic graduated as Doctor of Laws in December 2008 and has specialised in the field of family law and human rights. She is the founder and director of Women’s Rights Foundation and has been actively advocating for women’s rights.
Rest in Peace Gloria Watkins alias bell hooks. You captured the minds and hearts of many with your simple but not simplistic writing in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, with its lovely lucid essays on various topics and the pain felt with regard to multiple oppressions and the intersections of race, gender (including sexual orientation and the scourge of homophobia) and class. The same applies to your acclaimed *Feminism from Margin to Center* arguing for intersectionality with other oppressions to do justice to the struggles of women. You found a kindred spirit in Paulo Freire despite what you call his “phallocentric paradigm of liberation”.

The two books by him you cite over and over again are *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Education for Critical Consciousness*. You never got to do a ‘talking book’ with Paulo even though you admitted that this would have been a consummation devoutly to be wished. What a great conversation this would have been. You shook the foundations of white feminist politics with your initial *Ain’t I a Woman* which incurred the wrath of many but won the admiration of others. I recall your writing that you had a hard time finding a publisher for this book which came with the subtitle ‘Black Women and Feminism’.

Your publication *Teaching to Transgress* with your landmark essay on Freire, first published around the same time in a memorable anthology of essays on the Brazilian educator (*Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter*) by Peter McLaren and Peter Leonard, is to be treated as de rigueur when analysing Freire. What a coincidence you departed in Freire’s birth centenary year. You broached many topics such as the blonde, white feminine hegemony embraced by Madonna which you piercingly decried in *Outlaw Culture*.

You perhaps wrote one book too many with *Teaching Community* where you used up too much space telling us how tired you are and that you needed a break. Perhaps the book itself was living testimony to your being spot on in this regard. The book culture industry must have got you by then. This should not detract from your other work which
was full of love for humanity and for the suffering of all those who are marginalised. Exemplary as a writer in English, you have been translated into several languages and your impact can be felt well outside the US and Britain to include Italy and Paris, the former as indicated by the Universitas Alma Mater Studiorum, Bologna electing to confer on you an honoris causa degree and the latter through the setting up of the bell hooks-Paulo Freire Institute. Your conversations with the Rev. Cornel West were legendary, the chemistry between you two encapsulated in *Breaking bread*. I saw and felt first hand your charisma and magnetic power at a talk you gave in 1992 at York University in Toronto where a number of halls were packed to the rafters.

As a PhD student at OISE/University of Toronto, where your writings were staple readings, I had to be there. It was one of the highlights of my stay in Toronto. You reminisced on your youth and on Malcolm X that day and the latter’s legacy as Spike Lee had upped the ante with brief quips on his then eagerly awaited film on the subject with Denzel Washington in the lead role. I recall your insisting that a person from the audience, who struck a discordant note met by a chorus of boos, had the right to speak, a gesture that enhanced your democratic credentials. I followed you and heard your soft voice over and over again on YouTube many years later. These included your recorded conversations at the New School in NYC. Despite your fame as writer and speaker, you seem to have kept your feet firmly on the ground keeping ‘closer to home’ as you say in one of my favourite essays from *Talking Back*. It is an essay I shared regularly with prospective teachers in an undergraduate course unit I taught in Sociology of Education at my home university (the University of Malta) titled ‘Learning, Identity and Difference’.

I always imagine you in heaven exchanging views and exuding your loving warmth with Audrey Lorde, Stuart Hall, Aretha Franklin, Paulo Freire and the great maternal grandmother whose name you adopted as pseudonym and wrote in small case throughout as a sign of deference to her. You shall always be loved as you yourself loved too well.

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Women, Fear and the Achievement of Autonomy

By Sara Azzopardi

In a time where we pride ourselves over how far we have come on the aspect of equality, the phrase “I am a feminist” is often combatted with “but, women already have equal rights”. So, the question we immediately face is: what is the future for feminism? Is there any use left for it in our society?

Some years ago, Simone de Beauvoir wrote ‘Enough ink has flowed over the quarrel about feminism; it is now almost over: let’s not talk about it anymore.’ (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 23). It seems that even in 1949, the future of feminism was in question, so how come in 2022, seventy-three years later, we are still finding things to discuss, and the battle of feminism is not yet over? It is easy to take one look around and discover the struggles which women often face, even in modern society, which we continually insist is based on the equal rights of the genders.

Feminism is one of the oldest movements in the history of the world, and it will remain a movement for the foreseeable future – we will always find that being born and identifying as a woman will automatically set specific struggles in your life. In A Room of One’s Own, Virginia Woolf wrote that for women to succeed in fiction, they would already need to have their own means for independence. She writes that while William Shakespeare was sent to school to improve upon his talents, Judith, his fictional sister, was made to stay at home, even though she too was blooming with imagination. For this reason, she writes that ‘it would have been impossible... for any woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare.’ (Woolf, 2022). The only distinction was that one was born a man, the other, a woman. This shows that for a long time, simply being born a woman immediately puts one on an unfair standing in the world. It is for this unjust reason that we demand a future for feminism. We still have a long way to go for the creation of a society where there is absolutely no need for one to be feminist.

Recent events (such as the overturn of Roe v. Wade or on a more national level, the murder of women simply because they exist in the world as women), have shown that although we have been moving forwards in terms of equality, and in terms of viewing the woman as an independent person, there remain people who strive towards the objectification of women. The focus of feminism is the complete autonomy of the woman, not as a creature to be dominated and subjected to the control of others but as people who are fully capable of making their own decisions. We should aim to teach all members of society, from the youngest to the eldest, that we need space to make our own decisions. Not in a forced, made-up scenario where I am given the opportunity to speak simply to meet some type of gender quota, or to be ‘politically correct’; that is another way of objectifying women, reducing them down to a number or a percentage, a milestone to reach.

In reality, I am free to do all that I wish for – I can behave, dress and act in any way I want, society gives me space to do so. I am not attempting to argue that our society is still running on the idea that the only way for a woman to succeed is to marry and bear children. We have reached a time where women can choose a career and they have a choice over their lives. But one must accept the
consequences of their actions and be prepared. I am free to choose any career I want and study any subject even if they are predominantly jobs done by men, but I have to simply shut up and accept it when my workmates attempt to humiliate me one minute and try to flirt with me during the next. I knew what I was heading into when I chose that specific career, so I must now deal with the circumstances which may arise simply because I made a choice and happen to be a woman in the field. Yes, I am free to roam around the streets on my own, but do not be surprised, when tomorrow on the news, you will hear of my death and the comments somehow make it seem as if it was my own fault that I am now dead – “what was she doing on her own in the dark? Why was she dressed in a skirt that is an inch shorter than it should be? We are not blaming her; we are just saying... how the world is”. And of course, as women we are brought up to avoid these frightening situations. We are not taught to change or challenge “how the world is”, but rather, to change ourselves. It is easier to condition us from birth with fear and teach us how to avoid our own downfall.

So, it seems, I do have autonomy, but it is a double-edged sword. Too little of it means a life of restraint, too much means a life more prone to danger. These scenarios are the price we pay for being free women. We can choose what we like but within a specific safety-net. We are taught to protect all our friends’ drinks from strangers, walk at night with keys firmly pressed between our fingers, and to call as soon as we get home safe. As long as there is this element of fear surrounding women’s choices, we will never truly be free to choose what we really want. Fear has throughout human history, been used as a powerful tool to control others. In women’s lives, this fear is pervasive and arresting. Therefore, we cannot be inspired to change the world, because changing how the world perceives us, means taking a step too far. It means overstepping boundaries set for us to remain safe. It means sacrificing our safety for the sake of making a point. It means being angry, being emotional, being a “feminazi”, and we of course, do not want that. So, we just sit pretty, dress appropriately, laugh along the sexist jokes, and bite our tongues, not because we are not capable of doing otherwise, but because we are afraid that doing otherwise might lead us to danger. If this is considered as autonomy, then we still have a lot to work on.

Achieving real autonomy, thus, is the future of feminism. I believe that it is the future for all social movements which strive to gain equality for struggling sections of our society and minorities, be it the LGBTQI+ community, or those communities who struggle to eliminate racial bias from our society. The lens through which we need to look at human rights is that of autonomy, that is, treating people as people, simply put. It is said that de Beauvoir truly understood the underlying foundation of sexism after having seen instances of racism. What misogyny, racism and homophobia have in common is that women, people of different races and people of different sexual orientations and identities are merely treated as the ‘Other’. Not as humans on their own personal journey in the world, but as a separate part of society – the Other which can be objectified, dominated and oppressed (Beauvoir, 2011).

Through the lens of autonomy, society and the law should broaden their structures to treat me as my own person. Real autonomy should allow me to choose my own actions without fearing the outcomes. We should aim towards a society where we do not sacrifice freedom for safety. Of course, achieving this is not as easy as it sounds. But society evolved to accept the new idea of a ‘working woman’ or a ‘childless woman’, which not long ago were unimaginable concepts. This emancipation in ideas occurred because we opposed objectification and nurtured a society which viewed us as independent people, worthy of making our own decisions. So, is it too much to ask for a society where I am free, but I am also safe? Where I am independently myself, without being scared for my own well-being? This is what we should strive for next – a society where being born and identifying as a woman does not immediately expose me to a feeling of fear over my safety when making my own choices. Education about respect for another person’s autonomy and valuing each other’s personal space is the way to go.

The future for feminism, I believe, is achieving this type of autonomy. As long as there is fear shielding my decisions, I will always be reliant and dependent on other people – I will always remain an object to be controlled. I am not the first to say this, and I will certainly not be the last. For as long as the objectification of women persists, the urgency for autonomy shall remain.

References


Sara Azzopardi, currently working as a paralegal, graduated with a BA in Philosophy (Hons.) and recently, an MA in Philosophy from the University of Malta. Her Master’s dissertation focused on the dichotomy between rationality and emotions as seen from a phenomenological and existentialist perspective, with a main emphasis on Heidegger and Sartre.
What is the link between non-human animals and women? To what point are the issues of non-human animals relevant to feminism? Women have been at the forefront of animal advocacy since the late eighteen-hundreds. In doing so, they have marked the movement for animal rights with a particular sense of ethics, empathy, and action. But not all feminists are in favour of including non-human animals’ ethics and care as a concern for this movement. In fact, a common position for feminists is to reject any similarity that can be found between women and non-human animals. This is mostly because women were considered to be inferior to men and they were likened to “lesser” creatures. So much so, that liberal feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Simone de Beauvoir have both argued for women’s equality by underlining the notion that “…women are intellects and have rational minds—like men and unlike animals” (Adams and Donovan 1999, p. 2). This is largely because of the patriarchal societies where both women and non-human animals are perceived as inferior entities to men.

But in fact, similarities between the two can be found, as described by Carol Adams (2010) in The Sexual Politics of Meat, where she presents the best-known argument which shows the existence of a link between violence against women and that against non-human animals. She calls this the cycle of objectification, fragmentation, and consumption. By which, in short, both non-human animals as well as women are treated as objects or “rendered being-less” (p.74). Adams argues that it is due to the idea of the absent referent, that the objectification of both women as well as non-human animals connects the violence that is perpetrated against them. The idea behind this notion is that non-human animals and women are considered as being absent from their consumption and this happens because of objectification as well as fragmentation. For instance, Adams gives the example of non-human animals being absent from their consumption, as they are objectified and fragmented in such a way that their flesh which is eaten, does not visually look like the non-human animal it came from. When this happens, the consumer forgets that the non-human animal was a living being, and so is distanced from the violent act of butchering (p.74). So, in her words, “Animals in name and body are made absent as animals, for meat to exist... If animals are alive, they cannot be meat. Thus, a dead body replaces the live animal. Without animals there would be no meat eating, yet they are absent from the act of eating meat because they have been transformed into food” (Adams 2010, p.66).

It works in an identical way when it comes to women, where they are objectified and considered as being absent from their sexual consumption.
The absent referent connects the objectification as well as the consequent violence that is perpetrated on women and non-human animals in how the violence is referred to. When violent behaviour on women is described in expressions of violence that are perpetrated on non-human animals, (for example, when raped women use the expression that they feel like “a piece of meat”), it shows that violent behaviour on non-human animals is the norm. Similarly, by speaking of violence on non-human animals in expressions which are usually used for women, such violence will be normalised as well as remain unseen. The example given is that of the “rape rack” which is used to impregnate cows (p.82). This reveals how the violent behaviour against women and non-human animals is strengthened and eternalised in a vicious circle, resulting in them being linked because of their social objectification.

Adams also claims that there is a link between the violence perpetrated against women and non-human animals and male dominance together with meat eating. This is, as she explains, due to there being a patriarchal association among them (p.62). Since meat always has been linked with male power and manliness, eating non-human animal flesh is representative of patriarchal control as well as dominance. An example of this is given by Adams “… he threw scalding water over me, leaving a scar on my right arm, all because I gave him a pie with potatoes and vegetables for his dinner, instead of fresh meat” (p.63). Since vegetables, fruit and grains are seen as second-class food i.e., women’s food, male vegetarians are not considered as not being real men but as being effeminate. Male dominance can also be found in situations where women are considered as second-class citizens, resulting in them not requiring the same amount of meat (per week) as men (p.51). In fact, there were times when women would eat meat with their children once a week while men would eat it daily. Also, if there was a shortage of meat such as during wars, males were given preference in meat rations as it gave the soldiers strength, while civilians (mostly women, children and the elderly) were urged to cook meatless meals. Another point mentioned is the patriarchal traditionalism of women preparing meat meals for men. Adams speaks of Ethiopian women who would cook two meals – one with meat for men, and another without for themselves. There are also accounts of women deliberately not eating their portion in order to offer men the high-quality foodstuffs at the cost of their own dietary requirements. (Adams, p.49).

Another overlap brought forward by Adams is about butchering. The non-human animals’ doom in their butchering is used in language to oppress women. Whereas non-human animals are the absent objects, their fate is constantly convened because of the metaphors of butchering being used against them. Adams claims that the use of such terms i.e., meat, butchering phrases etc, causes women to believe that they exist as meat. The metaphorical use of the word “butchering” evokes the brutal action of non-human animal killing whilst strengthening the sense raped women have of themselves as “pieces of meat.” Starting with Jack the Ripper, Adams describes him as seeing women as meat because they were eviscerated in a way that permitted for a comparison with non-human animals butchering. She quotes Pearsall (1969) where a police report stated, “She was ripped open just as you see a dead calf at a butcher’s shop” (p.308). In addition, Adams mentions there are speculations that Jack the Ripper was interested in particular body parts. This reveals that the women at the time believed they were being considered as non-human animals for the purpose of medical research (p.307). Norma Benney’s (1983) description of a centrefold of a magazine which “showed a naked woman, spread-eagled and chained on an operating table in a butcher’s shop surrounded by hanging animal carcasses and butchers’ knives and cleavers while a man in a red, rubber, butcher’s apron prepared to divide her with an electric saw” (1983 p.148). Adams comments that from this perspective, the phrases used for instance “piece of ass,” “I’m a breast man,” and “I’m a thigh man” show their true roots. For Adams, such examples indicate that there is a concept of metaphorical sexual slaughtering of which the basic elements are:

- the blade, which can be a true one or a figurative one as the preferred tool (in porn videos the blade is replaced by the camera lens in doing implemental violence)
- the assailant is striving to dominate/devour/defile the body of the target
- the fetish for certain body parts
- meat consumption offers the picture of slaughtered non-human animals.

Metaphorical sexual slaughtering can also be found in narratives. For instance, the language used in the short story of The Woman Who Rode Away by D. H. Lawrence indicates both actual and sexual consumption. In films, sexual slaughtering can be seen in male pornographic films, such as in the notorious snuff films. Adams sees snuff movies as being the deification of metaphorical sexual slaughtering. This is because they exemplify all the required elements: the blade as a tool, the victim who is female, the desecrating

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1 Specifically medical research as it was thought that Jack the Ripper could have been a doctor.
of the body as well as the fetishism of women’s parts. In the lack of a real victim, snuff films are a reminder of what non-human animals go through constantly. Adams finally mentions that rape and butchering of women can be found in holy books such as in the Book of Judges of the Hebrew Bible (p.88).

In just a couple of points mentioned, it is clear that there is a link between non-human animals and female oppression. What can be done for this to stop? As Glasser (2011) suggests, and I believe it to be the way forward, feminists and animal rights activists need to work jointly. Both would profit if the other was informed of their cause and are conscious of how their oppressions are related and strengthen one another (p.57). It is inherent in patriarchy that as power is in the hands of the few, there is a need for the majority to be divided into diverse minority groups. “Patriarchy maintains itself effortlessly when oppressed groups feel their goals are at odds, oppress one another, and remain disparate rather than uniting” (Glasser, 2011, p.57).

References


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Despite historical disagreement on the meaning of the term feminism, there is global consensus that the term incorporates both a political and an intellectual movement (McAfee, 2018, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). While the latter is interested in the theoretical ideal, the former comprises activism on the ground for the amelioration or emancipation of the status of women in society. At the risk of over-simplification, the evolution of the feminist movement has passed through four historical periods - dubbed as waves - which despite broadly sharing common goals, have been characterised by remarkably diverse methods of achieving them. Although each wave succeeded another in terms of time, an observation of key processes in each of the movements would highlight that each wave stemmed from a shift in the perspectives of the women (and men) at the heart of it.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, out of an environment of urban industrialism and liberal, socialist politics, rose the first wave of feminism which brought with it the suffragette movement and the white woman’s right to vote; the waves that followed brought legislation for equality in pay, criminalisation of domestic violence, and female sexuality and reproductive rights, narrowing the disparity between white man and white woman (Delao, 2021). In the meantime, class and race came into the mix, whereby the proponents sought to establish equality by celebrating differences across all facets of women’s lives and fighting for the privilege of not being labelled or stereotyped by one’s gender, race, or social class. The last decade has seen an emergence of what has been called the fourth wave of feminism. Its proponents tend to fight systemic white male privilege. It has continued the third wave fight against gendered stereotypes and is all for deconstructing gender norms. This fourth wave also saw the dawn of online feminist activism with movements such as the #metoo movement and Time’s Up, which brings me to my question: Where is feminism today?

As with previous waves, variances in opinions on key issues are driving new divides in modern-day feminists. Although some may regard feminists who think differently from them as undermining the fight, others would disagree. As is the case in any movement, many are grateful to differences in opinions that ensure that the feminist movement in its entirety progresses through changes in society. Some would
agree that these divides are pushing feminism into a fifth wave.

Fourth wave feminists today, more than ever, employ identity politics whereby every issue is seen as a gender issue. Feminists are divided – for example - over transgender theory, and their stance on the issue depends on which identity politics they employ. Not all women are ready to concede that being a woman is a matter of spirituality and identity rather than physical attributes – and this results in some feminists denouncing transgender women while others feel that the feminism fight should encompass transgender women too. Germaine Greer – adored for years by feminists, and then vilified over her opinion that rape victims should be named along with perpetrators because they have nothing to be ashamed of – is of the opinion that transgender women can never be women. She goes on to give her reasons, which centre around the biology of women, and this has earned her the transphobic label as well as solidifying her anti-feminist one by feminists who do not agree with her (Burton-Cartledge, 2015). Judith Butler, on the other hand, believes that while biology is determined at birth, gender is a discursive construction. Some feminists will fight for trans women to compete in female-only sports; while others argue that these feminists are undermining the identity of ‘woman’ that they have fought so hard for. Those who are for the inclusion of trans women in the definition of women, label others transphobic, while feminists on the other side of the spectrum, label these feminists misogynistic and accuse them of attempting to cancel the meaning of the word woman.

Fourth wave feminists also differ in terms of the scope of their feminism. Those who employ identity politics and subscribe to critical, postmodernist notions and theories such as intersectionality - who might be better suited to the “Progressive” or “Leftist” epithet than they are to the “feminist” one - are united in their harsh critique of advanced economies in the West, criticising such societies on the basis of the inherent, structural patriarchy undergirding them and in turn, the secondary status they bestow upon women - especially racial/ethnic minorities - in comparison to men. Feminists of this ilk, however, tend to use a different yardstick and a comparatively attenuated approach in their appraisal of other, non-Western societies, as they may consider any sort of criticism of non-Western ways of life as racism or even cultural violence. Others - those who consider themselves feminists first - are more likely to call out certain non-Western cultures within which the structural impediments for women are comparatively irrefutable.

One conundrum faced by identity politics is that we all have more than one identity and this causes dissonance in those who purport to classify themselves into one, such as that of woman, liberal, catholic, and conservative. It is in fact identity politics that are causing the largest divide between fourth wave feminists and those who do not identify with their stance. In a time when women have broken more glass ceilings than any other faction of society in history, fourth wave feminists are referring to our societies as patriarchal. They bash men for being masculine, coining - and liberally using - words like ‘mansplaining’ and ‘mansplaining’ while simultaneously promoting women who exhibit such behaviours. They speak of ‘toxic masculinity’ everywhere and exhibit a great deal of ‘fragile femininity’ where everything is hurtful, women are victims, and men are perpetrators. Of course, toxic masculinity exists, but it is not the only form of masculinity that does. It is as if fourth-wave feminists are no longer trying to fight inequality, or to redress the balance, but to be taking issues to the other extreme, tilting the balance of inequality in favour of women, as if they are seeking retribution for past sins of men.

The fourth wave of feminism, much like each one before it, brings with it a divide among feminists - the fifth seeing the fourth-wave proponents as victimising themselves and other women, while fourth-wave feminists see the emerging fifth wave as concerned only with their personal advancement rather than that of all women in all spheres of society around the globe. Fifth wave feminists counteract this by saying that it is only by presenting as equal - and different, and that is ok - that women are treated as such. This is reminiscent of the debate over post-feminism going back to the 1980s.

The fifth wave of feminism is characterised by the dichotomous dilemma of pushing for the female to be represented in top positions across many sectors, but not wanting to highlight any difference in gender when it comes to the performance of the roles in those top positions, and naturally – that the pay received for the work performed in those positions to reflect the work rather than the gender of the worker. In fact, fifth-wave feminism has come full circle, denouncing the very desire to work, noting employment as enslavement (Moran, 2012). Fifth wave feminists are distrustful of government - and that includes female politicians. They see fourth wave feminists as doing more to further victimise women than to promote them as equals. Through the fifth wave, the woman is seen as far more than her gender. Fifth wave feminists are not afraid to criticise other females who deserve it, because women are in fact equal, and that makes them no less accountable than their male counterpart.
While the first four waves of feminism were characterised by proponents aiming to bring about change in the existing political systems of the time, fifth wave feminism is all about tearing down the current systems and rebuilding them into ones that are inclusive of all marginalised groups, and they regard current politicians - regardless of their gender - as the antithesis to progress in this regard. This is most evident in the US, where Kamala Harris is the first woman, first black and first south Asian person to hold the office of the Vice President; at face value, one would expect women - most especially those who are black and South Asian - to stand behind her, but that is not completely true. One finds that many black women were worried about what a Biden-Harris presidency might mean for black people, insisting that one looks at Harris’ past policy as a judgement of character or political competence, rather than judging her on race or gender alone. Much like the previous waves of feminism, the fifth movement is arising out of a shift in perspective of its proponents.

In Malta recently, this divide was seen in the recent gender-corrective mechanism applied to the House of Parliament, whereby fourth-wave feminists argued that over time, this would create a gender-balanced parliament. Many disagreed with the mechanism being implemented at all, and there were assorted reasons given for this which are best left to another discussion, except for those women who were vehemently against the mechanism being implemented because they felt that it was insulting to offer women the advantage. Many a public and private discussion were held on the matter. Those women who felt affronted by rather than a sense of justice from this mechanism - consciously or even perhaps unwittingly - share some characteristics with fifth-wave feminists, and some earlier versions of feminism - even if some might not even identify as feminists at all. These women are saying that sharing gender with a parliamentarian does not make them feel any more represented by that person. With the current polarising issue of reproductive rights, where many women have been vociferous on both sides of the argument, it is evident that gender does not denote representation.

A worrying trend highlighted by Murray (2019) is not what proponents of any societal faction believe, but the way in which those who are of opposing views are ostracised or labelled as bigoted, bringing discussion to a halt, or preventing discussions from taking place in the first instance. As is often the case with other waves of feminism, it is not always easy to distinguish between fourth- and fifth-wave feminists; much as with other beliefs, individuals might be liberal on one issue and conservative on another. And that is not necessarily a terrible thing either. Indeed, if feminism can move away from rigid identity politics, those who consider themselves feminists – including activists and scholars - may be far more comfortable aligning themselves on individual issues, rather than being boxed into exclusive discourses.

Where I see fifth wave feminism heading is towards an era where women do not see themselves as victims of a patriarchal society, but rather, as already equal to the male counterpart and ready to accept nothing less; an era whereby one is held accountable to their responsibilities towards society, regardless of their gender; and hopefully an era where disagreements on the issue are discussed far more freely.

Each wave of feminism has driven away feminists who disagree with it – and as a result – moved on to create a new faction of people who declare that “I am a feminist, but...” for fear of being seen as somebody who pushes the previous wave’s
agenda in its entirety. Such divides - although conflictual in their emergence – are pivotal to any movement. The discussions which emerge from them may help drive waves forward in relation to changing societies. Regardless of the discourses of each wave of feminism, and the divides that rose from them, each of the waves were products and producers of respective social contexts; the fifth wave is no exception.

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“In addition to community building, we can transform our world by imagining it differently, dreaming it passionately via all our senses, and willing it into creation. As we think inspiring, positive, life-generating thoughts and embody these thoughts in every act we perform, we can gradually change the mood of our days, the habits of years, and the beliefs of a lifetime.” – (Anzaldúa, 2015, p.20).

“The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us – the poet – whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free”—(Lorde, 2007, p.38).

According to the Aztec myth, Coyolxauhqui, the moon goddess, was decapitated and dismembered by her brother and her head was tossed into the sky, which in turn became the Moon. The phases of the Moon are conceived as Coyolxauhqui assembling her parts, only to fall apart again, ad infinitum. Coyolxauhqui’s story signifies for the Chicana feminist thinker Gloria Anzaldúa, a non-linear, cyclical process of healing without a telos or resolution. “The Coyolxauhqui imperative” notes the necessity to reflect on and tend to one’s wounds—or “shadow beasts,” as Anzaldúa likes to call them—and seek to achieve integration, both individually and collectively.

Bridging self-transformation and social transformation, Anzaldúa’s “spiritual activism” invites us to rethink feminist praxis through the healing perspective. In this perspective, feminist praxis consists of political action, broadly construed, geared toward healing and reintegration. Given that the spiritual often denotes something otherworldly, as opposed to the material conditions around oppression that activism is supposed to change, Anzaldúa’s use of the term “spiritual activism” may sound oxymoronic at first glance. Yet decolonial feminists like Anzaldúa problematise the supposed split between the spiritual and political. Drawing from indigenous spiritual traditions, Anzaldúa offers an understanding of political activism that takes as its focus individual and collective forms of healing. She particularly focuses on trauma, which can be both individual and generational; personal and interpersonal; bodily, psychic, and cultural. By drawing on this understanding of healing as a matter of social transformation and a framework for political action, I suggest that Anzaldúa’s invitation to “change the mood of our days” provides impetus for liberatory social movements. In Anzaldúa’s framework of spiritual activism, conocimiento [consciousness] comes not simply from what happens to you, but from how you choose to respond to it. Spiritual activism involves an attentiveness to and a mindful transfiguration of negative affects like resentment, anger, anxiety, and fear, which are reactive, into active values that serve individual and collective healing. In Anzaldúa’s account, the first step toward healing is the counterstance. The counterstance consists of a disavowal, of situating oneself against oppressive forces. Yet the counterstance, as Anzaldúa suggests, is not “a way of life.” For healing to take
place, reaction in and of itself will be inadequate and one must find a way to move beyond the “no,” toward another way of life. She writes:

A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed; locked in mortal combat, like the cop and the criminal, both are reduced to a common denominator of violence. The counterstance refutes the dominant culture’s views and beliefs, and, for this, it is proudly defiant. All reaction is limited by, and dependent on, what it is reacting against. Because the counterstance stems from a problem with authority – outer as well as inner – it’s a step towards liberation from cultural domination. But it is not a way of life. At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes. Or perhaps we will decide to disengage from the dominant culture, write it off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory. Or we might go another route. The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react. (2012, p. 101)

Anzaldúa’s spiritual activism provides a framework for understanding that while pain, loss, trauma, injury, etc. have an important place in political activism, one must recognize that in isolation, they tell an incomplete story. The acknowledgment of harm is a step in the direction of transforming the structural conditions that surround that harm. The next step is the collective re-imagining and bringing about new conditions that are going to enable new possibilities for flourishing. This kind of transformative action, for Anzaldúa, is accompanied and enabled by embodying the change that we would like to bring about in the world. In other words, one first becomes that which one would like to manifest. In order to be able to do so, we must begin to dream new dreams. We must continually replace limiting beliefs with ones that facilitate and serve healing, shifting perspective from the position of victimhood toward empowerment. As Cara Page puts it, “If we’re not imagining where we’re going, then it will constantly just be pushing back outside from inside of cages, as opposed to imagining what’s happening outside of cages” (2019, p. 30).

“The future is feminist” has become a much popular slogan that found resonance well beyond the confines of feminist marches and protests. Yet we often tend to imagine that a feminist future would paradoxically be one that renders feminism moot: when feminism reaches its goal of ensuring justice and equality for all genders, there would no longer be a need for feminism. Feminism’s goal, in other words, is to ultimately render itself unnecessary. This understanding of feminism, however, presents it as something that is wholly reactive and oppositional. Yet feminist praxis consists not only of identifying and preventing harm, but also of a collective rebuilding of another kind of a world where our energies are not constantly spent on damage control; a world not merely of survival but rather of flourishing. As Keating (2013) also notes, when the political response is cramped into a space of opposition, protest, disavowal, we are left with limited mobility. Sometimes we are forced into this space, when, for instance, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade that allowed for various states to implement bans and restrictions on abortion or when Turkey pulled out of the Istanbul Convention, an international accord to provide legal protection against domestic violence. While the counterstance is a necessity, it is not sufficient by itself. A more capacious sense of political agency requires an articulation and implementation of action that will not be limited to reaction. This understanding serves as a reminder that we are not stuck in this cramped up space as resistance must be creative as well as critical. The message Adrienne Maree Brown (2022) shared after the U.S. Supreme Court’s overturning of Roe v. Wade, along with some resources like the National Network of Abortion Funds, reminds us of this notion: “Stop thinking that the state is going to be the solution to any problem. Community is the answer.” Where systems fail us, we are not defeated. We continue to grow stronger through organising. Our political agency may not be captured by and is much larger than mere reaction.

When thinking about decolonial feminist responsivity, Anzaldúa prompts us to ask: Does the response come solely from a place of hurt, woundedness, and victimisation, from that of a counterstance, without the possibility of growth, integration, and healing? Are the values that are at play reactive or active? Does the response help us move toward joy and abundance, or does it get us stuck in “resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial” (Lorde, 2007, p. 58)? Anzaldúa stresses the need to be more attentive to how political affects operate and to see if they are enlivening and replenishing of our energies, rather than underscoring and deepening a sense of lack and entrapment. The goal here, for political agency, is to move past reaction and the state of victimisation, toward empowerment and action. The attentiveness to “how it feels” becomes a source of knowledge that guides praxis.

Bringing mindfulness into political organising, Anzaldúa shows us that political action is not superimposed on the rest of our lives. It begins in the mundane, in the relation between the self to the self and to others. Changing the mood of our days, as linked to both individual and collective healing, is a political project of working through trauma, both individual and generational:
“As I see it, this country’s real battle is with its shadow—its racism, propensity for violence, rapacity for consuming, neglect of its responsibility to global communities and the environment, and unjust treatment of dissenters and the disenfranchised, especially people of color” (2015, p. 10).

Attending to how affects work politically, transfiguring ones that deplete our energies to ones that will sustain us and our social movements, and seeking to move beyond reaction toward action are some components of Anzaldúa’s “spiritual activism”. The healing perspective requires that we pay attention to “how it feels” and cultivate practices of self and community care. Thinking with Anzaldúa, some important questions for feminist praxis emerge: Do we love our work at its hardest? Do we feel affirmed and exhilarated by it or depleted, desperate, hopeless? If the latter is true, what can we do to bring ourselves back into attunement with excitement? What sorts of affects does our work produce? Does it serve to bring about more healing and compassion, guiding ourselves and others to be more strongly attuned to joy? “How it feels,” in this sense, serves as a compass for where we are and where we would like to go.

References


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The Significance of the Role of Women in Plato’s Work

By Sam Sultana

To understand the future of feminism in philosophy, one should look backwards to first analyse Plato’s various dialogues and the role women play in them. Of importance are his treatment of female figures in the Menexenus and Symposium, and his then-progressive views on women’s role in Greek society put forward in the Republic. In a time where women’s capacities for philosophical discussion were ridiculed, Plato’s work was an important step forward in Classical philosophy.

Before Plato, the accepted view on women’s place in society was that they should take on domestic duties, caring for the household and handling child-rearing. Theano, a Late Pythagorean figure whose letters are telling of women’s role in society before Plato, spoke of the job women had to maintain harmony in the household by doing their domestic duties, for instance disciplining children. (Waithe, 1987) found that in her letter to Nikostrate, Theano also spoke of her view that women have different virtues from men, which are closer to temperance and virtue. For this reason, she should weather her husband’s affairs with courtesans. This was not considered as the woman being subordinate, but is the result of marriage as a moral agreement between two people because of reflection and good judgement on sharing a life together (Waithe, 1987, p. 46). To respond with more wrongdoing would create more disorder, which it is the wife’s duty to minimise. This spoke to a larger distinction between women and men, which is that of private and public duties, respectively.

In the Republic, Plato proposes an overhaul of the entire political structure of Athens, motivated by the democracy’s sentencing of Socrates to death. He proposes that the family structure be scrapped. He thought it was a dysfunctional unit which encouraged hostility between different families to become wealthier and more powerful, and widens the economic gap between the rich and poor. It results in internal conflicts between the members of the family, and larger conflicts between families, which can even lead to war (Brisson, 2012). Plato instead proposed that the population be divided based on the defining virtues of each person, which are defined whether the individual’s soul is dominated by the appetitive, spirited or rational part. Together this harmonious balance of virtues in the state’s structure would result in justice throughout the state, just as the same balance of parts within the individual’s would give one the virtue of justice. It thus follows that Plato thought the definitive part of a human being is the soul, which went against the societal norm of defining humans by their body. In the latter, there is an immediate distinction between women and men, while in the former it is not the case, and thus, “it is the soul’s excellence that defines the place and role of human beings in society” (Brisson, 2012).

Instead, Plato believed that women should have as much of a right as men to become a warrior or a philosopher leader of the state, as long as the courageous or rational part of the soul is dominant. This idea was seen as outlandish at the time, as women were considered weaker and less intelligent, and were not considered capable of leadership or battle. This was further proven, however, by the mention of women attendees of Plato’s academy in the third book of Ionian Philosophy by Diogenes Laertius (a Greek biographer of many different philosophers).

Notably, no female figure appears as an interlocutor within Plato’s dialogues. However, in many cases, the interlocutor simply serves as a mouthpiece for the words of the female philosopher. Only Aspasia of Miletus and Diotima are given the distinction of philosophers in these works, but female students are named, for instance Axiothea of Philesia. In the case of Diotima, her very existence is called into question, as many believe she is a creation of Plato. Nevertheless, their relative prominence in philosophical works is notable.

Aspasia was known as a well-versed user of rhetoric, putting her in direct opposition to Socrates and Plato. Despite this, her presence in the Menexenus still speaks to a level of respect commanded by her. In the Menexenus dialog, Socrates recites an oration dedicated to the city of Athens that Aspasia wrote, the Epitaphia, to Menexenus. While the philosophical value of the Menexenus is debated, it is seen as a tribute to the reputation and skills of Aspasia as a rhetorician. Despite Plato’s opposition to the use of rhetoric by her and the Sophists, her key role in the dialogue can still be seen as a tribute to her influence and mastery. She was later charged with public impiety but defended by her student Pericles and acquitted. This charge shows that she was considered important and influential enough to be a threat.
The question of Diotima’s very existence has been called into question, as mentioned above. Some say that she is nothing more than a fictional creation of Plato’s for the *Phaedrus* dialogue, intended to represent a specific position of Plato’s. Some believed he was being sarcastic by indicating a woman could have taught Socrates. However, Diotima is not portrayed as overtly satirical. In the *Symposium*, Socrates speaks highly of the teachings of Diotima and her ‘philosophy of love’ at a banquet of his male peers. Similarly, Plato chooses to spotlight Diotima, a rare female figure in philosophy portrayed as graceful and powerful, who commands respect from her peers. This choice is meaningful, whether she truly existed or not (Alizoi, 2020).

Her theory of beauty, and the ‘ladder of love’ has many parallels with Plato’s theory of the forms.

Plato’s portrayal of female philosophers was an important step forward in Classical philosophy, as he emphasised the capacities for leadership, philosophical discussion, and thought that they had. This was controversial in a time where their virtues were believed to be separate to men’s and more suited for the household than for intellectual function.

**References**


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Interview with a Philosopher
Sophie Loidolt

Ian Rizzo interviews Professor of Philosophy Sophie Loidolt from the Technical University of Darmstadt ahead of the conference ‘Confronting Ethics’ to be organised by the Department of Philosophy of the University of Malta on the 17th-18th November. Professor Sophie Loidolt has been invited to be the keynote speaker for the conference.

1. Reviewing your works that are available online, I gather that your principal subject of focus is phenomenology. Could you perhaps expand more on this branch of philosophy for a wider audience?

Phenomenology is a tradition stretching over 120 years by now, with famous exponents such as Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler, Edith Stein, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Emmanuel Levinas and Hannah Arendt. And many more should be named here. This is only my selection! From these names, one can already gather that phenomenology gave rise to or is closely intertwined with major philosophical developments in the 20th century: French Existentialism, hermeneutics, deconstruction, even poststructuralism. And it always reached out to other disciplines. Some examples are sociology, psychopathology, law, or the cognitive sciences. Given this broad influence, it really is one of the big intellectual movements since the last century. And that of course also means that it is pluralistic. There is not “one” phenomenology but many ways to do phenomenology that involve discussions and disputes about core topics, such as consciousness and existence. That also makes it a very lively tradition.

In short, phenomenology wants to go back to the “things themselves”. This was Husserl’s motto. It means to look at how “the things” manifest themselves as meaningful in our experience – instead of consulting theories first and then make something fit into their pregiven frameworks. The range of “things” stretches to all that can be given or more technically “intended”: from logical propositions to social relations, other subjects, works of art, perceptual objects, values, etc. Phenomenology explores how they manifest themselves in different ways and how we perceive, feel, think, act towards and with them. Phenomenology thus methodically explores structures of experience, consciousness, and existence and the correlative world we live in. This opens a wide field of analysis, both in the theoretical and the practical realm.
2. Two of your publications are based on the works of two main philosophers: Husserl and Arendt. In what way did they have an influence on your philosophy?

As I mentioned before, Husserl opened up a whole world of possible analysis and deep reflection on how meaning comes about, and on how the world, others and historicity have a role in this. This was an eye-opener for me as a student and deeply impressed me. It is fascinating how he describes such seemingly banal things like perceiving a tree in front of your window; how different perspectives in perception correlate to our bodily movements and make us perceive one thing through all the different appearances, and through a constant flow of inner time-consciousness; how intentionalities and habitualities imbue our perceptions of the world; how the world’s objectivity comes about through others being able to perceive and be in it as well. And Husserl not only gives you the descriptions but he also gives you the method to continue the work.

With Hannah Arendt, I was fascinated early as well. Her sharp analysis and courageous judgments concerning political events are original, provocative, and outstanding, as is her whole life-story and personality. But what I found especially intriguing was that she politicised many of the phenomenological insights mentioned above. That the world is seen from many perspectives becomes politically relevant for Arendt. Totalitarianism forces us into one perspective whereas plurality, at the basis of Arendt’s political thinking, imbues the world with many perspectives and therefore makes it real and multi-dimensional. Appearance is not only relevant for things but for being human. By speaking and acting we appear in the world and manifest who we are, in the presence of others. But this is a fragile process that can be denied, destroyed or overruled by seemingly more important needs. Arendt always knew that lying, war, and violence, right up to the utmost destruction of human beings in the concentration camps, had not only been a reality but could be a repeat of that reality. Her alertness as well as her hope, epitomised in the positive experiences found and still find deeply inspiring.

3. You will be the keynote speaker in the international conference on Confronting Ethics that will be organised by the Department of Philosophy at the University of Malta. Can you give us a little hint on the topics you will be discussing?

I will discuss Arendt’s core topic of plurality, as I have just mentioned, and the question of what kind of ethics arise from that. It’s important to note that actualising plurality is not per se acting morally. I will especially look at the areas of life, truth, and reason with whose demands, plurality seem to clash with; matters of life are more urgent than matters of plurality; truth seems to vanish in the plurality of opinions; and reason is guided by principles that are not to be relativised on the political agora. Yet, instead of a clash, I want to demonstrate that the logic of actualising plurality calls for a responsible attitude toward the urgent necessity of these concerns, also for the sake of plurality itself. Furthermore, I want to emphasise the ethical relevance of actualising plurality against the menace of totalitarian politics or a contemporary biopolitics that can only answer the challenges of the global masses with dehumanizing measures. In short, I will try to develop the main outlines of what I call an intrinsic ethics of plurality — which is primarily political ethics.

4. Anyone who delves into the subject of ethics becomes immediately aware with the diverse approaches on how to confront ethical problems. Some of them many be even conflicting. From this this wide variety of approaches, what do you think are the best ethical foundations upon which one can assess ethical behaviour and thinking in an objective manner, if it is possible to speak of objectivity in ethics?

Like any subject that people have thought about in history, the theory of ethics is rich with different, diverse, even contradicting positions. What is special about the case of ethics is that it concerns everybody at one point in his or her life and that we cannot escape the question: What ought I to do?; What ought we to do?; How should I, how should we live?; What is a good life?; When have I morally failed so that I cannot look into the mirror anymore?; When are we responsible to act, and for whom and what? I always add the plural to make clear that ethics is never only a concern for an individual, but always for an individual in a community, and for a community, maybe humanity as such. As I said, we cannot escape this question, and how we decide shapes who we are.

Now, philosophical ethics does not tell us how to decide. As otherwise, it would simply be a moral code. Instead, it gives us principles of reflection at hand, it asks for the motivations, grounds and justifications of our moral decisions and actions. There are so many different ways to approach this philosophically that I find it impossible to say that there is one right theory. I think, and that’s not a very surprising opinion for a philosopher, that Aristotle and Kant have laid
out with great accuracy and precision already hundreds or even thousands of years ago what are the main concerns of philosophical ethics. I think that many basic questions do not change, and that we can still learn a lot from those canonical texts, also by trying to re-apply them again and again to our current situation. And even if many repudiate the principles of Utilitarianism, that approach can also claim for itself that it captures much of the reality or “realepolitik” of our ethical choices. The controversies that arise from only these three mentioned approaches often go to the heart of the ethical problems themselves. I would not want to miss one of them. They make the deliberation richer and that can never be wrong for serious choices. The only thing which I find not too helpful is naturalism tending towards determinism. Because this does not help me in the moment where I have to decide. I think that Kant’s argument still holds also in a world of advanced brain research: What does it mean to know that, for example, in my brain everything I will decide has already been determined? I still have to choose and act; I am a practical being and as such I must consider myself under the idea of practical freedom. This means, that I must see myself as the author of my actions. I find it hard to picture which kind of self-understanding we could have if we could not hold ourselves and hold each other accountable for our conscious and wilful actions and decisions. I doubt that we could live like that, also in a very practical sense.

As for objectivity; I think not only about the diversity of moral codes around the world but also on how various ethical theories agree on several things considered to be objectively wrong. It only gets trickier with objectivity when things get more complex, when principles clash, when one thing has to be weighed against the other. But without getting into these complex discussions here, I would, for a general answer to the question, like to point to good old Aristotle again: ethics is not logic, and it would be wrong to demand the same kind of objectivity from the former as we demand from the latter. One has to adjust the methods and the methodical demands to the subject one is inquiring. And in ethics, the subject is action and “getting it right” in human life, together with others. Whoever thinks that this is the same as a mathematical equation or an objective measurement in physics, does not know what he or she is talking about.

5. Are you worried that recent political events in the past five years are redefining the concept of truth?

The concept of truth – no. Maybe it shifts the culture of how truth is handled in politics and media. But also in this case, we should not think that this is something completely new. The last five years were definitely not the first period in history when truth and truth telling were undermined on a large scale. What is new are the technological means, although there were also technologies of mass manipulation and propaganda in the 20th century that worked well enough. For a more complex and still brilliant treatment of the question I can only recommend Hannah Arendt’s essay “Truth and Politics.” The main difference she introduces there is the Leibnizian differentiation of “factual truths” and “rational truths”. While rational truths, the truths of mathematics or logic, can always be rediscovered (even if they are suppressed), factual truth is indeed fragile, as it can be maneuvered out of the world, lied away as if it had never been there. Now, in politics, truth has frequently been attacked and lying was and is a means of action. But as Arendt points out, there is a difference between selective lying for my benefit and grand scale lying of propaganda or ideologies. The real danger of grand scale lying is that our ability to operate with the categories of truth vs. falsehood gets lost, and that makes us lose our ground in the worldly reality. Insofar, the concept does not change, but the ability to discern it vanishes. This happens, for example, when one considers everything to be an opinion that can just be contradicted by other opinions, and that’s it.

6. As you are aware, certain segments of the electorate in the Democratic West protested fiercely against vaccines and lockdown measures in the recent Covid crisis, claiming restrictions of freedom. Dare we admit that freedom is illusory in any human society that is constructed?

There is a brilliant little text by the Austrian legal theorist Hans Kelsen “On the Essence and Value of Democracy” from 1929, where at the very beginning he nicely discusses the tensions between freedom and society – with the result that individual freedom can only be saved by being transformed into social freedom. Otherwise, it will indeed remain an illusion. But social freedom is definitely no illusion and the procedures of democracy, which Kelsen impressively unfolds in this text, are the architectonics of this social freedom. Furthermore, it is an old principle of Kant’s law of reason that my freedom can only reach as far as it can be brought into harmony with the freedom of others according to a universal law. Trying to find the right criteria here and trying to weigh them on the basis of fundamental rights is what our democratic procedures guarantee. And that must allow for controversial discussion – which is a practice that has suffered greatly in the last two years, and which we must
defend and cultivate also in difficult times. We’ve seen
different strategies and measurements of our governments
and administrations all over Europe in dealing with the
Covid-crisis. And there are certainly many things to criticise.
But one thing must be clear, and it has become dreadfully
clear again by the recent events in Ukraine: If anybody thinks
they are in a dictatorship because of lockdown measures
or mandatory vaccination they’re just dead wrong. What
freedom, and especially political freedom really is, has
become painfully obvious again in Europe in the current
year.

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Anspruch und Rechtfertigung. Eine Theorie des rechtlichen
Denkens im Anschluss an die Phänomenologie Edmund
Husserls (Springer, 2009)

Einführung in die Rechtsphänomenologie (Mohr Siebeck,
2010)

Phenomenology of Plurality. Hannah Arendt on Political
Intersubjectivity (Routledge, 2017).

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which she conceives mainly as a phenomenology of plurality.
A predominant concern of our times is the search for our authenticity. The mass media, the market, and lifestyle gurus insistently hammer home the idea that true happiness lies in finding out who we really are deep inside and living life accordingly. Popular culture, however, often tends to interpret this journey as the cultivation of our individual wellbeing. Our singularity is reduced and confused with our personal contentment. All manner of practices such as yoga, couples therapy, past-life regression, spontaneous travel, inner-child work, and strict fitness regimes are promoted strictly for this end. In a world we often regard as too rapacious and violent for any hope of true progress, we close ourselves off in a quest for chakra alignment and Instagram-fuelled abs.¹

In narrowing most of our attention to our solipsistic self, as Brehnam Dalgleish points out in reference to the consumer culture, we tend to divorce ourselves from our social contexts and bifurcate ourselves from others, ‘who become mere asides to our individual fulfilment [...].² The mainstream idea of authenticity, as Charles Taylor reminds us in Ethics of Authenticity (1992), discourages any concern with societal responsibilities or the demands of our ties with anything that transcends our self-centred desires and ambitions.³

Perhaps an effective way to recuperate our proper care for the world around us is by redefining ‘authenticity’ through the concept of conscience. In its general meaning as a foreign yet intimate voice that instructs us on what is morally right or wrong, the event of conscience might provide a way how we can understand our most singular self as inextricably involved in a relationship with other beings and their environment. If, as various recent psychologists, philosophers, and sociologists on identity claim, the way we understand ourselves and our actions is through narratives with underlying themes and values, then perhaps, we can formulate a model for self-narratives that can express our authenticity as the experience of conscience. A more realistic, holistic, and potentially fulfilling idea of ‘who we really are’ might thus be ensured.


Simon Critchley’s phenomenological work on conscience is arguably one of the most well-known and influential in contemporary ethical philosophy. He describes conscience as the experience of a call to commit myself to a certain good. The call is inside of me and yet it does not come from me. In my most interior interiority, it is exterior to me; a foreign presence that is neither mine nor anyone else’s. Experientially, it is as if the call is external to my will, preceding the self-reflexivity of my ego. However, it can only properly exist for me if I approve of it when it summons me. We are bound by a virtuous circularity in that the call arises because I affirm it and I affirm it because it arises. And this reciprocity of response goes on in the direction of its momentum until an external factor disrupts and breaks the feedback loop.⁴

The demand that the call solicits me to follow, however, is every time too excessive to realise. As Critchley claims in *The Faith of the Faithless* (2012), the infinite responsibility it inaugurates divides the self from itself in that I endure a discordance between an inability to meet the demand and an inability to be myself with my will. This helplessness that does not seem to end causes anguish and guilt. I find myself neither capable of taking charge of what the call is asking of me, nor capable of taking charge of my empirical self with its capacities – which reduces me to an impotency. My ethical subjectivity is precisely premised on this self-separation or what Critchley would call, ‘dividuality’, in its orientation around the core values and beliefs that I have consented to when the call summoned me.⁵

The impotency of the event of conscience, however, paradoxically provokes my potency. Through my weakness to undertake the good that I am called toward, I find a strength to keep on trying, in the manner of Samuel Beckett’s expression from *The Unnamable* (1953): ‘I can’t go on, I’ll go on’, or *Worstead Ho* (1983): ‘Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better’. For Critchley, moral defeat becomes the necessary condition to a renewed effort, as it is also always its sure defeat. I can only try if I fail, knowing that I will fail anyway. The ‘malady’ of conscience can indeed be regarded as a Derridean quasi-transcendental, where the site that makes possible my courage is also what makes it impossible.⁶

It is the impotent side to conscience, however, that seems to hold Critchley’s attention (fascination perhaps?) in his works while its potent side is always either briefly referenced, often in a context of overarching futility – as it can never be enough – or at times virtually disregarded. There is also, it seems to me, a dramatization or exaggeration of this impotency to the extent that in *Infinitely Demanding* (2007), its agonies are compared, via Emmanuel Levinas’s ethical self, to a traumatic neurosis; the disorder induced after a traumatic event has occurred. The call, in other words, is defined as the interiorized reliving of an unprocessed, self-rupturing violence effected by some external agency.⁷ This can easily lead to what Friedrich Nietzsche would call a ‘conscience vivisection’ and ‘self-torture’,⁸ where the extent of my moral incapacity and the intensity of my guilt are too overbearing to move beyond them and act on their behalf. This is the reason Critchley prescribes humour as a way to buffer or screen conscience’s excessive severity and concomitant pain. A humorous selfrelation sublimes the distress by admitting to our fatal moral failure but from a standpoint that does not regard it in a punitive and accusatory manner but from a mindset that is benign and accepting. A humorous perspective is gentle on our inadequacies while laughing at them. By moderating and assuaging the exorbitant strictness of conscience, humour lays out the requisite detachment for the possibility of moral action to unfold.⁹

More than empowering us, true humour, for Critchley, seems to perform a more crucial function: it can capture and thereby encourage a mindset that acknowledges the impotency of my ethical subjectivity. Referring to the early Martin Heidegger’s own portrayal of conscience in *Being and Time* (1927), Critchley in fact grants that the event of conscience in itself as well can lead to an accepting attitude toward my irreversible failure as an ethical being. And in some irreducible way, he seems to bestow upon this acceptance a superlative value over the repetitive motivation that it can stimulate. Conscience and its humorous

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expressions can therefore lead to an attitude whereby I concede that once and for all I am fundamentally nothing but a perpetual moral lack. Going further, authenticity, for Critchley, is my approval of myself as a terminal failure; it is to want to have the want that is myself. To be authentic is to love one’s inauthenticity.10

It seems to me, however, that making peace with myself as morally hopeless and helpless is only a hair’s breadth away from turning into a nihilism and resignation instead of an ethical courage. If I acknowledge and welcome the facticity that there is nothing to be done about my ‘malady’, then virtually nothing is preventing me from giving up on my commitments, and by extension, setting me up on a path where I can do whatever I want in the ‘knowledge’ that nothing really matters and so anything is permitted. More so, if I am humorous about my acceptance, then its facticity can easily be ‘sweetened’ by an amused and playful approach that I would rather indulge than having to undertake the already-doomed task of being a moral person once more, always once more. After all, where is the fun in that?

Humour can romanticise the impotency inflicted by conscience into an appealing aesthetic that can treat our experiences with a levity that legitimizes an indifference to any moral sensitivity. By ridiculing what is terribly serious, jokes, if taken seriously in spirit, can refuse to see and engage with what is serious in life. The serious is strictly reduced to a playful attitude – which is undeniably addictive. Literature, film, and TV-series abound with characters exhibiting such a type of behaviour that leads into a spiral of hedonistic adventures. Charles Bukowski and the protagonists of his novels, Hank Moody in the show, Californication (2007-2014), Roger Sterling in the show, Mad Men (2007-2015), and none other than the Marquis de Sade himself are but a few exemplars of the jaded but witty figure who has sublimated their tragic lot into one endless party.

If we are to concern ourselves with a model self-story of conscience with the aim of recognizing the authentic self as actively committed to others and societal institutions, then, we must convincingly focus in equal measure on conscience as an event that provokes, stimulates, empowers. To illustrate this is to identify closely the kind of suffering that is particular to conscience. In its irremediable extremeness, the suffering presupposed by Critchley’s ‘conscience’ is uncannily not so different from any other form of physical or psychosomatic suffering if this dispossesses us of all control over ourselves. And intense pain, of whatever kind, does reveal us in all our tragic ethical incapacity. What, then, makes the pain of conscience special in any regard? In the narrative model being introduced here, it is characterized as an ethical or a virtuous pain. It is the result of our affirmation of certain virtues.

The concept of virtue in our context designates an excellence of mind and character that is intimately related to ethical behaviour. As a cognitive-affective disposition, it is deeply entrenched in our conduct, characterizing a particular mindset that acts as a motivator for our decisions. With Gabriel Marcel’s own definition in his essay, ‘Sketch of a Phenomenology and Metaphysic of Hope’ (1951), every virtue can be seen as a mode how the call of conscience articulates itself, a particular expression of commitment I am asked to open myself to for a good to be realised. To say yes to the call is to make myself available to the virtues’ guidance.11 Three fundamental virtues here would be faith, hope, and love. If I suffer because of my love for a good, for instance, it is only because in my commitment to that good I have not given enough love. It is because I have failed to live up to its impossible standards. And that same commitment is cause for me to try once more – ever harder.

Intrinsic to the mindsets the virtues invoke is a dialectical logic that casts light on how they motivate me to act through the suffering of conscience. Critchley alludes to this briefly in Infinitely Demanding when he points out that the anguish of moral failure tends to reveal the good aspired for in an agonizingly acute and urgent profile – which in turn moves my will to act for it once more.12 The pain of betrayal paradoxically provokes my active faith: the deeper the betrayal, the more faith I am provoked to have. Perhaps the extent of my estrangement from the good is roughly proportional to the extent of passion motivating me to re-commit myself to it.

In Figuring the Sacred (1995), Paul Ricoeur traces the same conscience dialectic in relation to the virtue of hope, the basic structure of whose dynamic we can discover in all the other virtues. The virtues inspire courage because they are all variants of a bond to the call. Their strength in my weakness is derived from their pledge. We can understand therefore how faith, hope, and love all derive their lucidity,

10 Critchley, The Faith of the Faithless, pp. 188-94; Critchley, Infinitely Demanding, pp. 77-83; Critchley, On Humour, pp. 93-111.


12 Critchley, Infinitely Demanding, pp. 22-3.
resolve, and seriousness from my constant inability to reach their demands. Their dynamic is one that repetitively refuses to give in to defeat. Imposing on the virtues my self-serving criteria and agenda brings out a guilt that can in turn stimulate me to let go of my ego and pursue them with more determination than ever before. The virtues perform as an empowering resistance to their negation. Because and in spite of my virtuous weakness, I can grow virtuously stronger. 13

Driven by their undermining, the virtues’ power is also derived from the prominence of hope in their performance. Hope, Ricoeur claims, chooses to see signs of better times to come just when I am subjected to an incapacity to give enough of myself to the virtues. It aspires for an indeterminate future when the good would finally have been realized. The never of my current predicament is redeemed to a not-yet – and this too enables courage. 14

Quite contrary to a Beckettian conscience, therefore, which is obsessively concerned with the return or haunting of impotency in potency, the experience of conscience that is being explored regards impotency as a crucial trial to be overcome, to be surpassed, perhaps each time more successfully than before if I am to triumph in my moral endeavours. Through its dialectic, conscience is seen to instigate a self-exceeding process.

The virtues acknowledge failure not because it defines me but because it is an inevitable and necessary stage in my development as an ethical agent. They acknowledge it to transcend it. On this view, the (negative) revelation of my inauthenticity does not impose a finality in my self-knowledge but serves instead as a means for my creative agency, my authenticity to be recognised.

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14 See Ricoeur, Figuring the Sacred, p. 206.
Can we say that this model for a self-story of conscience is accurate to the actual event itself – if there is such a thing? Perhaps this is not so relevant in the light of what this story structure aims to accomplish. In refiguring authenticity as interweaving the self with the world outside of it, it focuses on inviting in our life a conviction and engagement with improving the lot of others along with their social institutions, which, we are told, happen to be inseparable from our own wellbeing.

Without an empowering narrative of conscience, it is likely in many cases that the actual experience itself, if it happens, might be impoverished in ethical significance and outcome. It is probable that the impotency it subjects us to would be denied or suppressed, or worse, in our indifference, endured without any moral reaction. Conscience would here be degraded to a strict, senseless pain like any other. Perhaps all that is required to restore it to a prominence in our life is a simple act of faith in a self-story about it. And perhaps that same faith would reveal to us that we had already been called to have such a faith by the event of conscience itself. That is, we had already been called to have faith in a good life that requires us to see our ineptitudes as the condition for a renewed and stronger determination to realise it in the nearby or distant future. And perhaps who we really are is marked by this passion.

References


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“Let others complain that our age is evil; my complaint is that it is paltry. For it is without passion” wrote Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) at the beginning of Either-Or (Vol I, p. 30)*. His diatribe echoes in today’s world. The Danish philosopher may be known as a cuddly existentialist. In reality he was an early forerunner of the Alt-Right – and a major philosopher!

And all his thoughts were contained in Either-Or, written when he was a mere 29 years old. To be sure, the 800 page-plus tome, was not the first published treatise by the philosopher. But it was undoubtedly his most influential book – the book that gave birth to existentialism. The Danish thinker is often read as a religious philosopher, a man who challenged the ‘system’ of G.W.F. Hegel. He certainly was that too. But he was also a political thinker and one whose views for better and (mostly) for worse give us a unique insight into the philosophy of the religious right; those who question reason and rationality – and those who feel that they are left behind.

The Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing, was a title of a small book he wrote later in life (Works Vol. 11). It was Kierkegaard’s big idea that we live for passion, and that life was devoid of meaning if everything became ‘rational’. The great sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) famously wrote about the ‘disenchantment of the world’. Kierkegaard’s entire philosophy was a plea for a return to the innocent state – and one written half a century before the German scholar put pen to paper.

Kierkegaard wanted us to return to the passions. Not surprising, therefore, that Either-Or started with the question, “Is reason then alone baptised, are the passions pagans?” Based on a slight mistranslation of the English poet Edward Young (1683-1765), it set the tone. His entire philosophical output is one big no to this question, and, by implication, an affirmation of the role of passions.

One may not concur with him, one may maintain that we need to think rationally, but many people agree with him, and think there are too many experts talking down to simple folks.

Born in 1813 to a wealthy – and extremely religious – merchant, Kierkegaard lived an uneventful life. A bit of a dandy in his youth, he caused a scandal by breaking off his engagement to Regine Olsen – the daughter of a leading politician. Apart from two trips to Berlin in 1841 he lived all his life in the Danish capital. After the father’s death in 1838 he devoted his life to study. Kierkegaard blasted onto the scene in the early 1840s. Aged 28, the young philosopher had already published his Habilitation – or doctoral dissertation -On the Concept of Irony with a special reference to Socrates (1841), and four years before – prior even finishing his first degree – he had published From the Papers of One Still Living (1837) a savage demolition of his contemporary compatriot Hans Christian Andersen (1805 –1875) author of the of The Ugly Duckling and the Emperor’s New Clothes fame. Kierkegaard was an exceptionally wealthy man. To begin with, he squandered his father’s enormous fortune. When he died aged only 43 in 1855, there was barely enough money left to cover the cost of the funeral.

His works are many. His collected works cover more than 20 volumes. But it is in Either-Or that it all comes together. A sprawling mumble-jumble – a seemingly chaotic – and yet carefully crafted mixture of essays, fiction, letters, literary criticism. And with a pious sermon thrown in at the end, Enten-Eller (in the original) contains all Kierkegaard’s
thoughts as there were to unfold in subsequent works like Fear and Trembling (published later in 1843), The Concept of Anxiety (1844), Concluding Unscientific Postscript (1846), and Sickness Unto Death (1849). Supposedly published by Victor Eremita - one of Kierkegaard’s many pseudonyms - the book purports to be a bundle of notes the publisher accidently found when he bought an old writing desk.

Kierkegaard would often hide behind pseudonyms, sometimes with fanciful names like Hilarius Bogbinder, Johannes de Silentio, Johannes Climacus, and Vilhelm Afham. In an inspired literary move, some of them even went out to lunch in Stages on Life’s Way – a more easily digestible book covering the same ground as Either-Or and published the following year.

Other great philosophers too have started their respective careers with compendiums that cover – sometimes in rudimentary form – all their ideas in raw and schematic form; just think of David Hume’s Treatise on Human Nature, G.W.F. Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit, and perhaps Plato’s Republic. Kierkegaard’s Either-Or is such a book. The only major philosopher not to write in a major European language, Kierkegaard’s prose is a challenge even to those who speak his mother tongue.

Kierkegaard’s project was to dismantle Hegel’s dialectical philosophy. Unlike his contemporary Karl Marx who wanted to find “discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell” (Capital, p.10), Kierkegaard wanted to break entirely with the German master.

A literary scholar more than a logician, his attack was not coated in rational arguments as much as it was rhetorical. The intention was clear from the very first sentence of Either-Or.

“Perhaps, dearest reader”, he began on the first page, “you too have occasionally doubted the truthfulness of the sentence that the external is the internal, and the internal is the external?” (Either-Or, Vol. I, p. 9) In short, maybe the reader has doubted ‘dialectics’?

But instead of countering Hegel blow-by-blow, Kierkegaard provided three fundamentally different alternatives to the rational life. The full life is not to float along as the ‘spirit of the world’ is coming home – to use Hegel’s phraseology, rather to fully live is to choose, to be one-self. “What I propose, is in a sense absolute; to choose or not to choose. And as the choice is an absolute one, then either-or is the same” (Either-Or Vol, II p. 167)

Kierkegaard – being a bit of a snob – was aware that some prefer not to be bothered; they wish for a quiet life. This is what he later called spidsborgeren -the petit-bourgeois - the one who is characterised by “lack of spirit, subjected to determinism and fatalism” (Sickness onto Death, p. 97).

But for those who have reflected on life, there is a choice to make, to be an aesthete, an ethicist, or embrace religion. This is not easy, “the moment you choose you are as naked as a baby coming out of the womb” (Either-Or Vol II, p. 207). It is due to this choice that Kierkegaard’s book was called Either-Or, and, in turn, this was the reason he became the founder of existentialism.
The aesthete – personified by the libertine in the Seducer’s Diary (A book within the book) – is an epicurean who lives for pleasure, who has recognised the absurdity in life and has chosen to live life to the full. The ethicist, personified by Vilhelm Afham, a judge at the high court and a happily married man, chooses to live the ethical life. In some ways, this character seems like the personification of Immanuel Kant’s ‘categorical imperative’, “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (Kant, I. (1993) [1785]. Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals. (J.W. Ellington, Trans.). Hackett. p. 30). For Kierkegaard this is “to wear your duty, so that it becomes synonymous with your inner self”; to live a truly ethical life (Either-Or, II, p. 235).

And finally, almost as an afterthought, the book contains a sermon, ostensible written by a country-side vicar, and entitled “the edifying in the thought that before God we are always in the wrong”. This introduced Kierkegaard’s idea that you can choose unconditional and unquestioning faith. For the individual -hin enkelte in Kierkegaard’s vernacular – has an infinite relationship with the Lord when he realises that he is always wrong” (Either-Or II, p. 322).

In a later, more properly philosophical work, he stated that the aim of Either-Or was “to exhibit the existential relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical in an existing individual”, that is, to show, “what it means to exist and what inwardness signifies. This was necessary, because we live in an era of great knowledge, where this had been forgotten. (Concluding Unscientific Postscript, pp. 208-9).

Those who regard Kierkegaard as some cuddly, existentialist in the Jean-Paul Sartre mode, have to realise that he was uncompromising in his beliefs, and showed an uncompromising willingness to break all conventions and ethical beliefs if this was demanded by God. Later in life he complained when the broadsheet Berlingske Tidende published a favourable review of one of his books; he demanded to be criticised for being an extremist. And so he was.

The vicar in Either-Or, is identical to the figure of Abraham in the small treatise Fear and Trembling, which was published towards the end of 1843. Kierkegaard recounts how the Old Testament patriarch is willing to sacrifice his son Isaac when this is demanded by God. There is, Kierkegaard writes, “a teleological suspension of the ethical” (Fear and Trembling, p. 51) – in plain English, the end (God’s will) justifies the means (slaughtering your children).

To take such a radical step, Kierkegaard readily admits, is extremist, and runs counter to our morals and everything we believe. To take such a step requires the famous ‘leap of faith out in the 70.000 fathoms of water” – as he first wrote it in Stages on Life’s Way (Vol. II, p. 239), and he later – and more famously – in Concluding Unscientific Postscript – the latter being tome of 541 pages – and a sequel to the pamphlet Philosophical Fragments which merely ran into 92 pages.

To say that these ideas were Kierkegaard’s own is questionable. Towards the end of his short life, he authored a number of – frankly naval gazing - articles on the pseudonyms in which he made clear that he was merely the author of the authors, and hence could not be responsible for what they said.

Kierkegaard might have disagreed with – or agreed with – the characters he invented. (He also published a series of devotional articles under his own name which were rather run-of-the-mill exercises in evangelical pietism and devoid of philosophical arguments). That he is remembered – that he is relevant today – is due to the extreme nature of his thinking. And his protestations notwithstanding, there were plenty of seemingly autobiographical elements in his writings.

‘The Seducer’s Diary’, written at the time when he broke off his engagement with Regine Olsen, states, “I do not wish to remember my relationship with her, the fragrance has evaporated. I do not even want to say goodbye to her. Nothing is more disgusting that women’s wailing. I loved her but from now, I will not waste any time thinking about her” (Either-Or I, p. 410)

That truth is subjectivity was Kierkegaard’s oft-cited credo. Ostensibly a statement that positively embraced the universe of ‘alternative facts’, though, this being written by a philosopher, stated in a somewhat more cerebral way: “the passion of infinity is truth itself, the passion of infinity is subjectivity, and hence, subjectivity is truth” (Concluding Unscientific Postscript I. p. 169). Sympathetic? Perhaps not. But then again, those who believe to have seen the light – and Kierkegaard did – want to act in accordance with the truth and not in conformity with human conventions. There are many people who think this way. We ignore them at our peril if we fail to take them seriously as thinkers.

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*All references are to the collected works Kierkegaard: Samlede Værker, unless otherwise specified.
Foucault’s fond interest in the care of the self has led him to take a closer look at philosophy, more specifically, its transformational effect on the subject. This depiction of philosophy as a ‘self-transformative exercise’ was already written about and discussed at the Stoa around 2 millennia before Foucault. Although Foucault was not a Stoic, and his work isn’t necessarily an endorsement of Stoicism, he turned to ancient philosophy to understand the historical development of notions such as subjectivity, ethics, and philosophy ‘as a way of life’. He observed insight from the Stoics on their way of perceiving philosophy as an agent of self-transformation, and as Pierre Hadot asserts, this outlook aspires to emancipate the subject from its status quo, or better, to transcend it.

What transformation?

According to the Stoics, before any self-transformation can occur, the subject needs to acknowledge philosophy as a ‘medicine’. Foucault mentions Epictetus’s argument that first, one ought to form an image of oneself that is ‘in a state of need’, and that it needs to be ‘treated’ (through the practice of philosophy): ‘this, then, is where the philosophic life begins’. Epictetus’s Discourses continue by saying that you are not ‘treated’ after practising philosophy, as the self has still room to transform further if it wants to get closer to the truth:

“The philosopher’s school is a surgery: you ought not to go out of it with pleasure, but with pain. For you are not in sound health when you enter” (2014, 197).

The layers are endless for one to get closer to the truth, and the subject never stops experiencing the transformative loop. It starts from the state of need, then the philosophical treatment, then comes the transformation, and then back for another sip of the medicine. Moreover, the search for truth is lifelong. The Stoics’ search for truth is again explained by Foucault in the Hermeneutics of the Subject:

“In the ancient context, “the truth enlightens the subject; the truth gives beatitude to the subject; the truth gives tranquillity to the soul; in access to the truth, there is something that fulfils the subject himself, which fulfils or transfigures his very being” (2005, p. 16).
In one of his last lectures, Foucault refers to the Stoic exercise of ‘premediating adversity’, in which the subject meditates on worst-case external events, including poverty, illness, degradation, and exile. However, as Foucault argues in Technologies of the Self, ‘the meditation on death is the culmination of all these exercises’ (1988, p. 36). The Stoics contemplated events including death to transcend the Self’s ability to control emotional disturbances. This practice starts by listing several realistic catastrophes that could happen to the individual; then, the person ranks the catastrophes based on their difficulty and starts by contemplating the least difficult scenario.

The Stoics often considered one’s death as one of the hardest yet most important events to contemplate. As Seneca writes in his Letters on Ethics:

“Let us, then, compose our minds as if we have reached the end. Let us settle our accounts with life each day…By putting the final touch on one’s life every day, you don’t lack time.” (2015, p. 402).

On contradicting oneself

There is a sense of inconsistency in the self when portraying philosophy as transformative. In the book The Late Foucault, Michael Ure mentions Pierre Hadot’s example of Seneca, in which “Seneca does not find happiness in being ‘Seneca’ but in excelling ‘Seneca’” (2020, p. 31). Moreover, the subject is open to transcending his current state of mind, not limiting himself to what has already been known. Therefore, it is acceptable for individuals to contradict their understanding of the world to get closer to the truth. As Seneca mentions to Lucilius about acquiring new knowledge:

“I feel, my dear Lucilius, that I am being not only reformed but transformed; I, therefore, wish to impart to you this sudden change in myself” (Ibid., p. 22).

Foucault also left his impression regarding this in his Ethics: Subjectivity & Truth:

“You see, that’s why I work like a dog, and I worked like a dog all my life. I am not interested in the academic status of what I am doing, since my problem is my transformation. That’s the reason also why, when people say, “Well, you thought this a few years ago and now you say something else,” my answer is “Well, do you think I have worked like that all those years to say the same thing and not to be changed? This transformation of oneself by one’s knowledge is, I think, something rather close to the aesthetic experience. Why should a painter work if he is not transformed by his painting?” (1998, p. 131).

The subject and the other

Foucault observed from the Stoics a relationship between the caring of the self and the support of the other. This is expressed by Seneca’s friendship with Lucilius, and as Foucault remarked in The Care of The Self: “Seneca’s correspondence with Lucilius deepens a pre-existing relationship between the two men and tends little by little to transform this spiritual guidance into a shared experience from which each derives a benefit for himself” (1988, p. 53). Moreover, both Seneca and Lucilius are transforming their sense of self through the dialogue portrayed in their letters, serving as a ‘transformative agent’ for each other.

Lucilius was not the only recipient of Seneca in which the transformation of the subject was practised with the other. For instance, Foucault mentions Seneca’s On the Tranquillity of the Mind, a dialogue of Seneca with his friend Serenus, concerning the latter’s state of mind and Seneca’s intervention to help in curing Serenus’ worry and disgust.
with life. In the introduction to About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self, the editors state:

“The help that Seneca as a spiritual director can offer Serenus consists, then, neither in expounding a philosophical theory to him nor in reminding him of the moral precepts to be followed. For Seneca it is a matter rather of adding something to the pure knowledge of the rational principles of action—knowledge Serenus already possesses—to transform it into a true mode of life” (2016, p. 6).

Foucault’s interest in reading Late Stoicism (such as Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius) is also noted in Simone Kotva’s Effort and Grace: “[Foucault] would take inspiration from Stoicism and use it to rethink the nature of philosophy” (2020, p. 127). As noted by Foucault, ‘the care of the self is the ethical transformation of the self in light of the truth, which is to say the transformation of the self into a truthful existence’. This was important for the Stoics; their plea to consistently be virtuous manifested a sense of self-care for the subject to live in harmony, in their case with the divine order of the universe. The Stoics acknowledged that this is a lifelong process, in which the subject needs to continuously transcend itself.

References


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When touching upon the early stages of Western philosophy, images of “Ancient Greece” immediately come to mind, since the origins of our culture, and quite possibly our way of thinking, probably stem from there. But what are we really talking about when discussing Ancient Greece? I aim to clarify that. Ancient Greece is intrinsic to the Greek language, whose alphabet appeared around the 8th century BC and immortalises the Iliad and the Odyssey.

The writing of these two founding texts was a high point of that period. Chronologically speaking, Homer is at the heart of Ancient Greece since both poems describe a few episodes of the Trojan War, which happened five centuries prior. However, the period stretches as far as the creation of the city of Alexandria in honour of Philip II of Macedon’s son, five centuries later.

Four phases, four places

One observation is promptly made: neither Troy, nor Alexandria, nor Macedonia are in Greece! Ancient Greece included a large portion of the Mediterranean, and four crucial phases succeeded each other in four different countries: today’s Turkey, Italy, Greece and Egypt.

To simplify, let’s say that philosophy was, like science, born in the 6th century BC on the coast of what is now Turkey. More specifically, the booming port city of Miletus was where Thales founded a school whose influence would be major. Heraclitus in Ephesus, Eudoxus in Cnidus, many pre-Socratics grew up in this part of Asia Minor. Following the arrival of the Persians, philosophy’s centre of gravity shifted in the second phase towards Italy, where Pythagoras opened a school in the southern town of Crotone. As for Parmenides and Zenon, they settled on Velia, slightly south of Naples.

It was only at this point that the Greek phase, strictly speaking, began. As a reaction towards the Sophist Protagoras, Socrates set fire to critical thinking, and Plato and Aristotle happily poured oil on the flames. Socrates’ death sentence by a society which claimed to be democratic was unbearable for Plato who had not yet reached his 30s. He started to work, opened his Academy, and built a literary and philosophical masterpiece which addressed practically all topics, from science to politics, from love to linguistics. One of his students named Aristotle opposed his Master on fundamental points such as the
nature of Ideas. But their initial disagreement would become one of the most fruitful in the history of philosophy.

Egypt would be the fourth phase of Ancient Greece. At one point, Alexandria was home to all the mathematicians, astronomers and scholars of the Mediterranean - Archimedes before his Sicilian period, Eratosthenes or even Ptolemy who confirmed the presence of Earth at the centre of the solar system for another 1700 years.

From numbers to tools

Over the course of these four phases, philosophy and mathematics remained side by side. And regardless of the changes in intensity or polarity, this duo is to be thanked for knowledge and science.

The four major mathematicians of Ancient Greece are split into two groups separated by more than two centuries! Paradoxically, neither the centuries of Pericles nor Aristotle witnessed the rise of great theorems or revolutionary inventions.

The 6th century is marked by Thales and later on by Pythagoras, two thinkers who could both be filed under the philosopher-mathematician category and the mathematician-philosopher category.

The third century belongs to Euclid and Archimedes. The latter brought about a rupture through his passion for tools and technique. If Thales was the first of the mathematicians and believed that the world’s primary substance was water, then Archimedes was the first of the engineers because he designed his famous screw to make it rise.

A Greek miracle?

Jacqueline de Romilly’s prominent book Pourquoi la Grèce (Why Greece?) asks the right question: why is it that in this country with irregular borders, which is geographically complex and politically divided, with no particular natural resources, shaken by several wars (including the one that opposed its own cities Athens and Sparta) has Western philosophy been born? In her fascinating book, this major Hellenist provides a summary of her thoughts on the subject.

What some named the Greek miracle commenced in the blood, through the victories of Marathon and Salamis, where the Greeks dominated the Persians, both on sea and on land. It ends in the same violent way, with the victory of the Macedonians in Chaeronea. But the Greeks did not lose everything because their language would be chosen by the winners to continue conveying thought, a decision that would change the course of history. If there was a Greek miracle, it is also a miracle of the Greek language.

Two centuries of the ancient times undeniably stand out because of their historical, scientific and philosophical importance. They created the “classical period”, but it is vital not to confuse them because of their many differences.

- Despite a long civil war - named Peloponnesian – that would oppose Athens and Sparta from 431 to 404 BC, the century of Pericles and Sophists (5th century BC) witnessed the first steps taken by democracy and law, the beginnings of rational medicine with Hippocrates, a certain architectural maturity with the construction of the Parthenon on the Acropolis, and masterpieces of sculpture of which the Discobolus is the most famous.

- The following century is the one of Plato and Aristotle (4th century BC). Let’s summarise by saying that with these two giants, philosophy took off twice in some ways - two perpendicular ways of seeing things which nevertheless led to the rise of one single discipline.

The journalist and the academian

Three other fields had a similar dual beginning in Ancient Greece: history, theatre and chemistry. These major disciplines do not have much to do with each other, but they share the fact that they emerged according to two different methods.

Let’s start with history. During the century of Pericles, some started working on memory, hoping to describe, understand and explain past events. Herodotus was one of them. He worked as a historian the same way a good journalist would
work nowadays. He described the conflict that opposed the Greeks and the Persians just as his heirs Dominique Lapierre and Larry Collins did in “Freedom at Midnight” about the independence of India. Herodotus perceived his work primarily as a duty of inquiry on the past using important witnesses.

A generation later, Thucydides broke ties with his predecessor; rather than telling stories of the past by glorifying its heroes, he wanted to write history in the present for it to be useful to future generations. He discusses the Peloponnesian war which happened during his lifetime as would a university professor. Herodotus was credible, whereas Thucydides aimed to reveal the truth. Two styles, two approaches, two different perceptions of a historian’s profession. But it is Thucydides who can claim to be the father of modern history.

Laughter and tears

Life often happens along a narrow ridge that separates laughter from tears, making us frequently jump from one to the other, from comedy to tragedy. There is in each and every one of us a laughing self and a crying self. These two ways of performing began at the start of the 5th century BC. The staging of mythical heroes such as warriors of the Trojan war did not aim to flee the present moment but rather to underline the timeless reach of topics discussed, such as the importance and the place of women in the city. It is no coincidence that Antigone, staged by Sophocles, is still in our memories.

The same audience that applauded these tragedies also cheered Aristophanes’ comedies and their rare ferociousness against young aristocrats and even against Socrates himself, which he ridicules in *The Clouds*. Nietzsche got it right when choosing *The Birth of Tragedy* as the theme for his first book. He who wanted to take a hammer to the Greeks’ heritage really grasped how important the theatre was for them.

Atoms and men

Chemistry is indeed a whole other domain but there is yet again a tension between two very different points of view. Empedocles, on the one hand, believed that four founding elements (water, air, earth and fire) were at the origin of the world. His theory, which looks like a very first version of Mendeleev’s table, is quite exceptional; it was adopted by both Plato and Aristotle! There are not many examples of middle ground between these two men. Empedocles’ disciples are named “elementalists” with reference to the theory they refer to.

As early as the ancient times, some critics showed resistance and suggested that none of these four elements were elemental. According to them, a common denominator exists that is a lot smaller. Democritus suggested the idea of an “atom” (that can literally not be split) and the “atomic scientists” added Leucippus, Epicurus and later on Lucretius to their ranks.

**Summary**

By all accounts, Ancient Greece is a high point of our European history, and this is where the foundations of our culture and Western philosophy lie. Together, Plato and Aristotle created a frame of thought that would dominate for two thousand years. Ancient Greece is also where we will find the origins of science since Empedocles, Hippocrates, Ptolemy, or even Euclid will remain references in their respective discipline for a long time. This is ultimately where we can pinpoint the birth of democracy, even though – and it is important to keep this in mind – the majority of the population was excluded from it. Women, slaves and foreigners did not have the right to speak.

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Book Review

Spectrality and Survivance: Living the Anthropocene

Author: Marija Grech
Publisher: Rowman & Littlefield International
Year: 2022

By Niki Young

Marija Grech’s *Spectrality and Survivance* is an ambitious and original work which sets out to discover novel, non-anthropocentric ways of conceiving the world, and the interrelations between human life, matter, the present, and the future. In order to achieve this goal, Grech does two things: in the first chapter, she exposes the logic underlying much of the contemporary discourse centred around the notion of the “Anthropocene.” In the remaining chapters, she then develops novel ways of rethinking the latter notion through a “generalised spectrality.”

Our current geological era has been dubbed the Anthropocene due to the fact the human (or *Anthropos*) has effectively impacted the environment to such a large extent that the atmosphere and planet Earth itself could very well be viewed as the direct result of our diverse activities. As Grech rightly notes at the beginning of the first chapter ("Preservation and Stasis"), various thinkers have approached this theme in divergent ways. Some have hailed this era as bearing witness to the evolution of the human. On this view, human technological knowhow has also advanced to the point where our species is now able to use such skills in order to effectively reengineer the entire atmosphere and environment, thereby effectively solving our present tribulations. Others are however not as hopeful, and have derided the era of the Anthropocene as clear evidence of a severe form of human greed and destructiveness which is steadily driving our species towards an inevitable demise.

While both these positions seek a deep revolution of the present, they are nevertheless said to fail at this task to the extent that the logic underlying their thinking remains both tacitly and explicitly anthropocentric in its scope and persuasion. On Grech’s account, much of this discourse follows what she calls a “future-retro-vision” that relies on the assumption that our present-day activities constitute an all-too-human signature deposited on the earth’s strata, only to be read by humans in the future. Thus, the notion of the Anthropocene becomes a question of that which is inscribed by and for the human only to be read by other humans in the far distant future.

Grech effectively shows that such a logic is “specular” in at least two (interrelated) senses: first, the logic of such discourse mirrors the human to the extent that it gives the latter a central and exceptional role in the shaping of the environment. In this way, humans become perpetually
preserved in the geological traces that provide evidence of their activities, and the world becomes an eternal human “presence that promises to return” (p. 53). Second, such thinking is specular in that this “future-retro-vision” retrojects the present by reflecting it back from the vantage point of an imagined future. This is read to entail a static conception of reality, a feedback loop that reproduces the present by projecting it—along with its beliefs and suppositions—into the future and vice-versa. In so doing, it precludes any real opportunity for radical change insofar as the future is “always already” made present, and the present survives and persists in the future.

Grech seeks to move away from this specular logic by rethinking the notion of the Anthropocene in terms of a *spectral logic* which calls for the revaluation of the relation between the human and non-human. With this aim in view, the second chapter sets the ground for thinking a path beyond anthropocentric readings of the Anthropocene through a generalisation of the notions of a “lithic textuality” which extends beyond the human more specifically, as well as the living/non-living binary more generally. Grech argues that geological strata may themselves be read as textual, but this is not because reality is itself an (anthropomorphic and anthropocentric) discursive or linguistic (social) construct. Rather, this analysis is premised on the possibility of an interrelation—or what Karen Barad calls “intra-action”—between the material and the discursive. On this view, language and the world are not two distinct realms, but are rather deeply entangled and entwined to the effect that there is a profound correspondence between matter and meaning. In view of this fact, it would no longer make sense to ask questions on how—or whether—language is able to mirror the world, since such queries begin with the mistaken assumption that there is an a-priori division which needs to be explained.

Taking cue from the work of the twentieth-century thinker Jacques Derrida, Grech argues that the material can *itself* be thought in terms of a “general textuality” that “structures the workings of matter” (p. 75); there exists a complex web of differences and entanglements which underlies both the material and discursive, such that the Derridean “non-concept” of *différance* comes to name a process of co-implication, entanglement, difference and deferral inherent in matter itself. Stated as summarily as possible, Grech dislodges the notion of “inscription” from its narrow anthropocentric connotations, and generalises it in such a way as to name a complex “intra-active” interwoven web of relations that cut across commonly assumed boundaries between the human and its other, the material and the textual, the living and non-living, as well as the natural and cultural. Such a definition of materiality is said to be *spectral* in the following way: if the ghostly or spectral is defined as something which is both present in its absence and absent in its presence, then the materiality of matter is also spectral in the sense that every entity which is seemingly present comes to be defined by what it is not, that which is supposedly external to it and absent from it.

In the third and fourth chapters, Grech then further develops her generalised notions of spectrality and inscription. In chapter three (“Entangled Survivance”), she elaborates a notion of materiality inspired by Derrida’s notion of “survivance.” According to such a logic, the materiality of matter comes to be constituted through a “survivance,” a persistence defined in terms of processes of “production and reproduction, decay and decomposition, recomposition and recycling that always extend beyond life and the living” (p. 92). This notion is understood absolutely general in its scope and persuasion, and it therefore cuts across the distinction between living and non-living since it implies that entities—whether living or not—are constituted through a contextual web of interrelations in which the living shades into the non-living and vice-versa. In the fourth and final chapter (“Reading the Nuclear Trace”), Grech then goes on to frame the notion of material textuality developed throughout the work in light of the specific examination of radioactive decay. Radioactive materials are here said to “live,” but not in the sense of a vitalism which supposes that such entities—and matter more generally—are alive. Instead, to “live” is here understood in terms of a “living on,” a *per-sistence* (rather than *sub-sistence*) which is brought about through an “entangled process of survivance that transforms both [the radioactive materials] and their environments in turn” (p. 112).

As can be clearly seen, Grech’s work is influenced by Derrida’s “quasi-transcendental” notions of “inscription,” “différance,” “trace,” and “archi-writing,” and can be seen as a continuation of the contemporary drive to push Derridean thought beyond the twentieth century framing of deconstruction in terms of a philosophy concerned exclusively with language. Nevertheless, this work is also original in that it brings Derrida’s thought to bear on the contemporary discourse surrounding the notion of the Anthropocene. Grech’s writing style is impeccable, and maintains a perfect balance between scholarly erudition and clarity of prose. For such reasons, this work proves to be of interest both to scholars who are partial to the thought of Derrida, as well as to a more general audience looking for a different and novel understanding of our current predicament.

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Introduction – The state of nature

Political philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean Jacques Rousseau, reflected on the state of nature which attempts to understand and explain why humans need to be governed rather than being left to their own devices.

Thomas Hobbes (born 1588) posits the notion that a state of nature without any form of governance would collapse in total chaos as it compels humans to compete savagely for scarce resources. Hobbes believed that life without any form of control in a state of nature would result in being ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short’ (Leviathan XIII.9).

Conversely John Locke (born 1632) professed a more optimistic view as he believed in a universal tendency of humans to be urged by a constant ingrained obligation to help and refrain from hurting others as long as it does not interfere with their freedom.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (born 1712) also believed that humans are well-disposed and happy creatures, content with their state of nature. It was civil society that corrupted humans and led to wars, with the state being an active agency in the pursuit of war.

These three diverse viewpoints on the state of nature still hold a somewhat common belief that collective action always help to support and strengthen individual action. However much we may decry the institutional form of government, few are the outrages to dismantle it and come up with an alternative solution.

The case for government leads us to six other essential questions that the Manifesto seeks to address.

1. Who are the ultimate rulers?
2. Are individual freedom and the sacrifice paid to be governed reconcilable?
3. Where is power eventually concentrated in society?
4. What should be the purpose of Government?
5. What is the ideal form of Government?
6. Given the ongoing structural and social changes, can the state of government be sustained and reinforced?
1. Who are the ultimate rulers?

An observation of human nature in any structure of governing behaviour, will unravel two attributes in the power relations of social life – (i) an elite minority that possesses qualities which instil within them a materialistic, intellectual, and moral superiority over the ruled masses of people and (ii) a hierarchical organisational structure whereby status, prestige, and respect, progress along a pyramidal scale. Turning a blind eye to these realities may prove to be disastrous in the formulation of any political model of government.

Attempts have been made to set up an ideal structure of power that would transcend the human natural element of power. One of these ideals has been the direct democracy experienced in Athens in 507 BC whereby all male adults were eligible to participate in the assembly and vote. Direct democracy officially ended in 322 BC when Macedonia imposed an oligarchic government on Athens with its victory in the battle against the city state. The Roman Republic put into practice the idea of democracy from the Athenians and adapted it to a representative democratic form of government. Once again, the dark side of human nature prevailed when Caesar felt he would govern more effectively by declaring himself emperor in 44 BC.

Plato (born 421 BC) has long been known for his harsh critique of the democratic rule of the Athenian government. He felt particularly bitter at the citizens who in the Assembly sentenced his mentor Socrates to death for the simple reason that they could not tolerate Socrates constant philosophical questioning. But further than that, Plato believed that ruling was a skill like any other professions which could not be entrusted to people who did not have the expertise and experience to manage public affairs. Giving the people the right to choose their rulers, runs the risk according to Plato of electing those who have the loudest voices rather than those who guide their actions by rationality. Such an eventuality would render politics as a theatrical dramatic showpiece.

Plato’s political philosophy views were congruent with Chinese statesman Confucius (born 551 BC) who lived more than a hundred years earlier before Plato. Confucius visualised a wise and sovereign ruler whose qualities of virtue, faithfulness and sincerity would set a good example to his people. Such qualities would be reinforced by listening to the advice of a class of public servants and ministers that would prevent the ruler from becoming despotic.

Nevertheless, the history of humanity has clearly shown us that any power vested in an individual or group of individuals without any check and balances tends always to lead to
arrogance, pride, and self-aggrandisement. Furthermore, we cannot overlook John Locke’s argument that freedom is the most valuable right in any governed society and should be protected at all costs. And that of course includes the right to accumulate private property which Locke views as an important concept of freedom.

Since the period of Enlightenment, the concept of freedom has been widened to include individualism and freedom of thought, expression, action, association, and worship. As John Stuart Mill argues, society would suffer if such rights of freedom had to be curtailed as this would lead to baseless restrictions of human knowledge and innovation. Non-conformists, social innovators, free spirits, and eccentrics can help people towards new ways of doing things if there exists a political environment that tolerates openly the spirit of freedom without any fear of repercussions. Individualism and liberty have long been recognised as the key to human happiness and meaning of life. The question that arises is how they can co-exist with the practicalities of government.

2. Are individual freedom and the sacrifice paid to be governed reconcilable?

Jean Jacques Rousseau sought to address this problem by positing the notion of general or collective will - whereby all the people belonging to the governed society would assemble and enact the laws that ensure good governance and protection of individual freedom.

Historical experience has shown that Rousseau’s ideal is somewhat difficult to attain as the human condition makes it a very arduous task for people of different stripes to reach and maintain consensus over a long period of time. Perhaps the political model that approximate to Rousseau’s thinking has been the representative democratic model re-ignited after the French Revolution and the overthrow of many monarchies across Western Europe. The parallel development of industrialisation, open trade, free markets, and capitalist mode of production have been instrumental in pulling many people out of the poverty trap and contributing towards the rise of an educated middle class that fitted seamlessly in the bureaucratic structure of industrial society and the enlarged role of government.

The greatest fault line of the democratic process lies in the question of how the principle of democracy is effective in giving a free voice to its citizens just by simply creating a mechanism that gives the populace every five years the right to vote and choose their leaders. It has been noted that a large percentage of voters do not bother to exercise this right in the elections of the Democratic West.

Karl Marx (born 1818) criticised strongly this idea of liberty which has been put into practice in a capitalist society. He maintained that the concept of liberty in a capitalist society creates a false state of consciousness which is manipulated by the hegemony of the ruling class. Marx viewed an endemic political class struggle in the history of mankind that was ultimately reduced to two opposing forces
the owners of the means of production (the bourgeoisie) and wage labourers (the proletariat). Marx defined the capitalist mode of production as a system of exploitation and oppression of the wage labourers. While the wealth of society is produced by the fruit of labour, it is being appropriated in the form of profits by the capitalists.

Marx maintained that true democracy and freedom could only be attained when power is vested in an egalitarian system that is established through a communist state which abolishes private property. However, Marx was short on the specifics of how a communist state could be set up and managed. The handful number of states that have implemented Marxism such as the ex-Soviet Union States, China, Vietnam, and Cuba retained a political system that was vested in the power of an authoritarian ruler, or a committee made up of a privileged elite minority.

In a further snub to Marx’s ideal of an egalitarian state, China, and nearly all the other communist states (except for North Korea) have opened their markets to the globalised capitalist forces while retaining tight controls over political freedoms. It seems that Marx in his call for an egalitarian society has ignored the underlying force of human nature to create hierarchies and elite minority rule of power relations. Moreover, individual economic freedom has proved to be a positive incentive for creativity, personal choice, and innovation. Furthermore, the call for abolition of the family by many modern post-Marxists might have also gone against the seemingly natural biological construction of a human society. As Auguste Comte maintains, it is in the family where social and personal instincts are blended and reconciled, and where the principles of subordination and cooperation are best exemplified.

Nevertheless, Marx’s insights on the dark side of the nature of capitalism cannot be ignored. On the contrary they have been vindicated as the productive enterprises unleashed by the Industrial revolution have shifted to the financialization of the economy. This has been complemented by the process of de-industrialisation, offshoring of production, increased leveraged economic power of the banks and financial institutions and global forces that have taken precedence over nationalist priorities. The financial crisis of 2008 made an important revelation that showed us that many businesspeople had acquired financial power not through the fruits of productive efforts but from sheer speculation of complex financial instruments. The domination of the financial institutions in the global economy has led to a larger proportion of citizens falling deeper in debts and feeling constrained to maintain their heavy consumption patterns.

3. Where is power eventually concentrated in society?

Noam Chomsky (born 1948) concurs with this line of argument by sharing the Marxist view that a wealthy minority of people controls the key social and political institutions of the country. He argues that dissent and meaningful change are ineffective as the social elites manage to harness all their resources to maintain their positions to their mutual benefit. Any attempt at a radical reform would in Chomsky’s views result in two outcomes –
either a military coup which would restore power into the hands of private individuals (as happened in Chile in 1973) or the drying up of investment of capital which would have adverse consequences for the economy.

What the foregoing implies is that the wealthy class in one way or another always manage to maintain their dominance. Some wealthy businessmen have also managed to be elected and influence the democratic process to suit their interests.

4. What should be the purpose of Government?

This question tends always to be a divisive one and can best be answered by referring to the various political ideologies that cut across the egalitarian left and hierarchical right and between the communitarian and liberal beliefs.

The following chart reproduced from the article of Phil Badger published in Philosophy Now magazine (Issue 149, April/May 2022, pp. 14-17) gives a clear insight of how the political divide gives different interpretations as to the purpose of government.

The top right-hand corner (dark blue) embraces the hierarchical communitarians who represent the traditional conservative thinkers. They strongly value the stability and continuity of society that can be provided through the cohesive powers of tradition and the natural hierarchies that result from different classes of people.

The bottom right-hand corner (light blue) consists of the classical and neo-liberals who justify hierarchies of wealth and status in the name of meritocracy. They believe in the principle of the race to the top and giving free reins to this elite to pursue their own self-interests. By means of the trickle-down effect inherent in this system, they maintain that significant benefits would accrue to the rest of the population.

The top left corner (dark orange) refers to the communitarian egalitarian beliefs which is representative of the socialist ideology. Like their traditional conservative counterparts, they are sceptical about individualism and see a meaningful life as one rooted in a community being governed by a set of widely accepted values. They differ from conservatives in seeing class as a key aspect of social identity and work as a source of pride, dignity, and community.

The bottom left corner (light orange) represents individualists who like the neo-liberals tend to be sceptical of tradition and customs. However, they differ from neo-liberals and share with the communitarian left their lack of trust in the free and unregulated economic market and the non-egalitarian principle on which it is based.

In trying to answer the question about the purpose of government, these different points of views must be taken into consideration. Perhaps the answer to this question lies in finding out how these divergent views manage to find ways to co-exist.

1. Individualism remains the central tenet to human happiness and the meaning of life. Every human being must be guaranteed either through constitutional law or any other state contractual obligations, the fundamental rights to liberties such as freedom of thoughts, speech, actions, association, worship. John Stuart Mill’s principle should be kept in mind that government should only intervene in civil liberties to prevent harm being inflicted on others. If this principle is put into practice, a political environment could be fostered that is more tolerant of non-standard sexual orientation and more pro-choice on social issues such as legalisation of recreational drugs. Respect of individualism and non-conformity that does not cause harm to society.
might be more conducive to the implementation of the concept of inclusiveness. Meanwhile the principle related to the prevention of the harm principle should be extended to the environment, non-human animals, and all living things to confront the catastrophe that is looming ahead of us. Allied to these thoughts is the utilitarian philosophy which advocates that government should aim for those actions that bring about the best consequences.

2. Social order, tradition and institutions should not however be discarded. A community of shared values that emphasises discipline, respect, social stability, and continuity may prove to be an effective bulwark against the rapid and ongoing social and technological changes brought about by technological developments such as artificial intelligence, migration, climate change, pandemics. The family remains the best social unit of society.

3. If we wish to retain the creative impulse of humanity, we must acknowledge the fact that unfettered free markets are the key to and in sync with innovation, free choice, and the constant betterment of our standards of living.

4. Government though is expected to intervene in a free-market economy as individuals are born with different starting points in life. Governments must ensure equality of opportunities in their societies by providing basic services that can be availed of by all its citizens. These services which include health, education, housing, pensions, and a minimum living wage are to be sustained by a welfare state that protects people who might suffer from the pangs of inequalities.

Another two points are relevant to clarify the purpose of government:

The first point emphasizes that what should be given priority is the quality of government rather than ideology. The first impression of any good government lies in the provision of basic institutional and infrastructure services such as hospitals, schools, universities, roads, transportation, clean energy, waste collection, street-lighting, city life. High quality governance is achieved when the government manages the optimum balance between low taxes that are required to incentivise the economy and value for money expenditure that avoids public waste. Good governance demands fiscal discipline, accountability and transparency in the nation’s budget. Good governance can also be inferred from measures relating to criminality, violence, and treatment of prisoners. Trust which is so essential to the functioning of an economy can only be generated in an environment where the incidence of criminality and policing is low.

The second point relates to the environment. As already mentioned in SHARE 16 (October 2021, pp. 46-47) both the economic and political systems should be held responsible for the state of the environmental hazards we have to contend with. The destruction of the environment seems to be going on an unprecedented scale - from climate change to habitat dwindling, extinction of species, overfishing of the oceans, deforestation, air pollution, the destruction of the Amazon.

Our political systems, however differentiated they might appear to be, have rewarded greed and short-sightedness at the expense of the environment. Much damage has been done by the business world when raising or sowing doubts over the serious threats pointed out by scientists on climate change. The increase in temperatures and the intense heatwaves that are being experienced in many countries each successive year are showing that the threat to human survival is real and tangible.

One of the most important purposes of government lies in promoting a more ethical and responsible approach to nature that reinforces the belief that all living things have an equal right to life. The future survival of humans can only be guaranteed if we follow the deep ecology thinking of people such as Arne Ness who called humans to consider themselves as part of a complex interdependent system rather than passive consumers of natural goods. As stated in SHARE 17 (April 2022, p. 53) we must redefine what we understand by economic growth and look for alternative ways to measure life satisfaction and well-being. Of course, government can easily be tempted to ignore environmental issues because the populace might show a very low level of sensitivity to their repercussions.

5. So, what is the ideal form of Government?

The Manifesto initially proposes a political model that is based on the separation of the powers of government into three separate branches:

- an executive branch (responsible for enforcing the laws of the state)
- a legislative branch (responsible for passing and amending the laws of the state)
- a judicial branch (responsible for interpreting the laws of the state)

Based on the insight of philosopher Montesquieu (born 1689), this principle has become a standard practice and feature of governance in the Democratic West. But while
the judiciary has always been considered an independent branch of power that is autonomous from the state, the demarcation line between the Executive and the Legislative is not that clear in many parliamentary democracies of the West. Indeed, it is the Prime Minister and his Cabinet who wield substantial legislative and executive power in such parliamentary democracies. The leader of the political party that wins the relative majority of votes in an election is usually tasked by the President to form a government. The appointed leader then enjoys the prerogative to choose the Cabinet of Ministers.

The Manifesto proposes that leaders and candidates of political parties in Parliament elected by the electorate in a free election should focus on the legislative agenda rather than being involved with the day to day running of government business.

The elected parliamentarians should instead appoint a technocratic Cabinet led by a Prime Minister who enjoys a high level of trust in leading and managing the baggage of expertise in all the different areas of government. Ideally, the Minister responsible for every government sector should be a professional whose special field of study tallies with the pre-requisites of the job.

The case of having a technocratic government is based on the premise that government business has opened on a wide variety of fronts, apart from the legislative work required to implement the programme of the elected political party. Any government that takes up office, immediately realises that it has to respond to unkontemplated internal and/or external problems (such as Covid 19, war in Ukraine, energy crisis, inflation, political scandal, citizens unrest). These problems, sometimes, culminating into crises, tend to distract the Government from focusing on its agenda. Furthermore, government business demands strategic long termed planning and implementation of policies to face the
challenges such as the environment (with climate change being at the top of the agenda), demographic changes and technological developments. Government must take care to be fiscally prudent during its office term to pass on sustainable and sound finances to its successors.

The Prime Minister and his Cabinet must be held fully accountable by the elected Parliamentarians. So apart from the legislative role, Parliament will be performing an important scrutinising role that would ensure that the competence of the technocratic cabinet is being regularly and impartially monitored. Parliament will be effective in this role if it ensures that the technocratic cabinet is operating without any constraints and influence of special interest groups lobbying. It should also steer clear of partisan and populist concerns when responding to day-to-day crisis and long-term challenges. At the same time, it is important that Parliament, being representative of the citizens’ votes, ensures that the Cabinet shows a high degree of empathy with the concerns of the citizens.

Parliamentarians have another crucial role to play in the appointment of top-level posts in independent autonomous institutions such as the Attorney General, Commissioner of Police, Auditor General, Central Bank Governor, Chief Justice, Ombudsman, University Rector. Such appointments should be based on meritocracy to ensure that the appointees are fully qualified and experienced. A parliamentary committee representing the political parties in parliament (maybe even assisted with independent non-partisan expertise) should assess in a transparent way the suitability of the candidates for these posts.

In parallel to the existing Parliament and its legislative agenda, the Manifesto agrees with the latest political experiments being attempted by some countries such as Belgium to introduce a citizens’ assembly or council. The objective of this assembly is to encourage citizens to come up with topics they feel should be debated in Parliament and acted upon. Citizens’ assemblies are not meant to be a substitute for everyday business of legislating but to provide citizens with the required means to channel and raise political issues that they feel are being ignored or lying in a political stalemate. The citizens’ assembly can be chosen either from direct elections or from interested applicants. It is important that the citizens’ assembly in its make-up reflects a good balance of a nation’s particularities that relates to gender, age, income, education, and occupations.

A President elected by Parliamentarians (ideally with a two thirds majority) would oversee this whole political process and act as the final arbiter in case of any conflict arising between these institutional bodies. The Presidential powers, apart from providing a ceremonial role, would mainly lie in the formal approval of legislation passed by Parliament and in reaching out for compromise solutions in case of a

Proposed model that redefines the legislative and executive roles of Government.
political deadlock.

The Manifesto believes that a model that strictly separates the legislative arm of government from the executive one, might mitigate the government-opposition polarising divide. Majority voting could then perhaps change from strict party lines voting to the specific issues being debated in Parliament or on the government appointments being proposed. In this regard, Members of Parliament should not be sanctioned for voting against the party line. Another essential reform in parliamentary business is to ensure that the political parties are completely independent from the business class and special lobbying groups. This can be achieved by outlawing donations above certain amounts while allowing the State to support political parties based on the respective votes they attain in Parliament.

The Manifesto emphasises the importance that the success of any political reforms ultimately depends on the financial compensation offered to the persons occupying these posts of the above-mentioned political bodies. It needs to be stressed that financial compensation should compare favourably with the salaries being paid in the private sector. Otherwise, we might remain stuck with an archaic political system.

6. Can the state of government be sustained?

The final question that every political philosopher must confront is how the state of government can be sustained over time. In his book ‘The End of History and the Last Man’, published in 1992, Francis Fukuyama argued that humanity has reached the endpoint of mankind’s ideological revolution, when Western liberal democracy ascended after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. He argued that Western liberal democracy has become the final form of human government.

Subsequent events have disproved this thesis. Since then, China has transformed itself into a global economic power that shows no signs of loosening its political control or its commitment to respect human rights. Moreover, its centralised system of governance seems to be well entrenched. Russia has after the fall of the Soviet Empire gradually slid from an oligarchy to an autocracy while adopting a stance of oppression against those who fail to toe the line. The hijacked aeroplane attacks on the United States on September 11th, 2001, showed how the dark side of Islamic fundamentalism can also evoke sympathetic

Will the human condition ever reach the end of history?

support from immigrants who have settled in the secular West.

The greatest threat, though, that is rearing its head at the moment in the Democratic West, is the rise of strongman politicians in global politics. They are being elected because they have managed to convince a majority of the electorate that they are the ones who truly represent what the people value most. By conducting politics based on a cult of personality and arousing the fears of mass immigration and the excesses of globalisation, these emerging leaders are silencing critics and opposition voices by appointing family, trusted friends, and other people sympathetic to their cause in key institutions such as the judiciary and the media.

Donald Trump set a dangerous precedent to the world of democracy when he refused to concede his election defeat, claiming that the election results were fraudulent and putting pressure on the governors of the state and his own Vice-President not to certify the results. That the United States avoided sliding into political anarchy is attributed to the strong independent institutions that have managed to hold on to their commitments.

In his book published in 2022, ‘Liberalisation and its Discontents’, Francis Fukuyama now concedes that the liberal world order is in a state of crisis. He sees the attack on the liberal order coming from two main fronts. One of them is the populist right which attributes the rising inequalities of contemporary societies to the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and the globalising forces together with the open borders that accompanied it. The other attack
is coming from the progressive left which argues that real power lies in the regulation of social life that is hidden in structured institutions and mainstream media dominated by the elite and the constant adoption of their language to protect their interests.

Fukuyama seems to have hit the right note when he expressed his deep concern that that rationality, cognition, and natural science are now being openly attacked from all fronts. This is happening while factual objectives are being regarded as subjective and raw feeling and emotion are becoming more valued over cold empirical analysis. (2022, p. 113)

7. Conclusion

The analysis on politics by the Manifesto might sustain the view that the human condition rules out the possibility of harmony and consensus in power relationships. The early ages of civilisation are replete with dark manifestations of political behaviour that involved treachery, secret deals, betrayals, dishonesty, deceit and even murder. But yielding unconditionally to this fate would mean that we would be lending credence to Hobbes solution for authoritarian absolute rule to avoid any possible anarchy. In the end, we would also be supporting Machiavelli’s advice that to remain in power ‘it is far better to be feared than loved’, considering that men are in general ‘ungrateful, fickle, liars, and deceivers.’ (2004, p. 71)

However, we must bear in mind that while we cannot ignore our human natural animalistic impulses, our human mind constantly equips us to understand and analyse the situations at hand, question certain long held concepts and assumptions and critically rethink and redefine certain political ideas. That is indeed the most valuable role that philosophy can play in politics. Above all, it reminds us that our answers to political questions must be based on objective criteria that reach beyond our political leanings. That is what the Manifesto attempted to do with this piece on politics as the political order constantly grapples with the events of the age and future challenges.

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The art of dance has been around for many centuries, and this has led it to develop a very dynamic character. This would explain why it is so hard for dance critics and dance philosophers to agree on one single definition. While there have been many attempts to try to answer the question ‘What is dance?’, answers to this question have always resulted in mere descriptions rather than an actual definition. These descriptions would only refer to one particular type of dance that was popular at that specific time and place. Having said that, this article will not aim at finding a single definition for dance. Instead, it will show that no matter what description one associates with dance, it will always act as a tool for education. What this means is that dance is able to reveal truths about ourselves, the universe, and also act as a guide to how we should live.

From an Aristotelian point of view, dance is an artform that imitates real life. Through this mimesis it is able to produce a cathartic effect on its audience. This cathartic effect allows for the audience to feel and deal with certain emotions that they might encounter in real life. By experiencing these emotions through art, one will already be knowledgeable about how to handle and react to such emotions when facing them in real life situations. While all mimetic art is capable of such an effect, it can be argued, that because dance is so closely linked to human nature, it seems to evoke an even stronger cathartic effect than other forms of art. This is because of the gestural feature that dance possesses. Gestures are something that one does naturally in order to deliver their message efficiently and clearly during a conversation. Due to this, from a very young age we have been programmed to understand and react to gestures, and therefore it is something that happens automatically. In the same way that we have a natural understanding of certain gestures, the same happens when one is witnessing a piece of dance.

Dance employs human emotions, thoughts and feelings and communicates them through these gestures. Moreover, when these emotions are transformed into gestures the
audience will react and feel what the dance is trying to portray because of our natural instinct to react to one’s body language. In addition, dance has also been used as a tool by other artforms, such as adding movement to spoken poetry or adding a dance number in the middle of a theatrical performance. This is done so that the audience are able to better understand what is being implied. Furthermore, this continues to strengthen the claim that dance is able to leave a greater impact on its audience because it is so closely related to our natural instincts.

Apart from its gestural feature, at the very base of its foundation, dance is purely mathematical. This means that it can also be analysed abstractly. When explored in this way, dance is able to provide a visual representation of the inner workings of the universe allowing the audience to grasp and understand better the harmony found in the cosmos. This is reminiscent of Plato’s philosophy whereby the microcosm is a model of the macrocosm. The universe is a system made up of three main components: bodies, space and time. In the same way, dance is also made up of the same three components. Therefore, both systems operate by having bodies moving through space and time. This means that a human dance is only a smaller, more chaotic reflection of a heavenly cosmic dance. Due to this, when one witnesses a piece of dance, it is as if they are given access to having a closer look at how the world around us functions.

Other than the fact that dance provides a meaningful experience to those viewing it, it can also guide a dancer into making the right choices both in dance as well as in real life. From an ethical perspective, one must possess four important virtues in order to be a good dancer: namely, wisdom, temperance, courage and lastly justice. All of these push a dancer towards being the best they can be throughout their training. However, through exercising such virtues in dance, dancers would instinctively start to apply the same virtues when having to make choices in their daily lives. This ultimately influences dancers into becoming more noble as well as develop a good moral character which is considered to be beneficial for society in general.

The idea that dance can be beneficial for the whole of society continues to be strengthened through a number of Nietzsche’s works. By analysing these direct references in his work, one can see how dance is actually essential to our human life. The art in itself helps one appreciate life with all the good and bad parts that come along with it. Nietzsche emphasizes how dance is a tool which helps in further affirming our life on earth not just intellectually but also bodily. In fact, he argues that because of what it teaches us through our senses, dance is actually able to strengthen our values which will then allow us to remain faithful to our life on earth.

Taking all of these different perspectives into consideration, it is clear that dance cannot simply be viewed as an art that only provides one with aesthetic pleasure. Even though its aesthetic qualities continue to add to the beauty of the art, the real power of dance is the wisdom that it brings along with it. Whether it is about ourselves, about our existence, or about how to perceive our existence, it is an ultimate guide for living a good, healthy and happy life. Therefore, this leads to the conclusion, that in its very nature, dance teaches independently of the way it is constructed or executed. At its core, dance is educational.

Hayley Bonnici has successfully completed her BA Hons in Philosophy at the University of Malta in June 2022. This article is a summary of her thesis presented in the final year of her studies.


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