

Ancient Philosophy in the Present

Adina Bezerita¹

Abstract: The ancient quest to '*Know Thyself*' (Gnōthi Seauton) involved the mastery of the quadrivium and the trivium-- the precursors to contemporary interdisciplinary investigations in preparation for the revelation of wisdom. This paper points to the classical 'one-many' problem with its reception today in the potential form of the 'theory of everything' and suggests a philosophical syncretism with modern domains of thought across the sciences and humanities. This work provides a glimpse into prospective multi-dimensional levels of reality and their intersections onto empirically verifiable perspectives. The aim is to inquire into a synoptic challenge that would expand on a kind of knowledge relevant to the individual and the metaphysical Self.

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¹Philosopher and Scholar, University of Oxford & Cambridge, E-mail: adinab@me.com

The ancient quest to '*Know Thyself*' (Gnōthi Seauton) involved the mastery of the quadrivium (geometry, arithmetic, music, astronomy) and the trivium (grammar, logic, rhetoric) the precursors to contemporary interdisciplinary investigations in preparation for the revelation of wisdom. Geometry, for example, was used to show how anything could extend beyond the visible appearance to an invisible abstraction, held together by an idea, bound by eternity. 'Idea' in the ancient world was construed as a metaphysical entity that could be reflected onto a concept. Reginald E. Allen, in *Plato's Euthyphro and the Earlier Theory of Forms* (2013), thoroughly explains this phenomenon and its encodement in language. To illustrate, for example, think of a line: does what you see extend through both invisible and visible worlds?

The upcoming 'string theory', much popularised in quantum science, including by Michio Kaku in *Parallel Worlds* (2006) and *Quantum Supremacy* (2023), is adaptable and indirectly builds on these implicit assumptions. In conjunction with arithmetic, as a means to perceive divergence and integration, these two were aimed to develop a penetrating vision across dimensions of reality. This is well described in Aristotle's *Prior and Posterior Analytics*, which was picked up in select Persian and Byzantine thought, and later re-emerged in the European Renaissance. Music was understood as an auditory attunement to the harmony of the universe. It trained the soul to the intrinsic sequence in the expression of Being, while astronomy was used to recognise relations and patterns in the cosmos. This article casts a general survey on these viewpoints that have widely morphed into the liberal arts and sciences of today. Therein lies a worthy defense for an educational curriculum that teaches how to think.

Albert Einstein and Rabindranath Tagore had a very interesting conversation about these precise interconnections in July 1930. Not unlike classical philosophy, they too observed that diversity, composed of similarities and differences, is ordered and unified under One absolute. Absolute here should not be conflated with an exclusivist, restrictive and dominant creed and it should not motivate polemical agendas. The poets and artists of antiquity frequently employed the technology of allegory, analogy, symbol and metaphor on these principles. You can see already that the ties with the past can effectively renew the present, as they can inform us how to become better, more reflective humans.

Bruno Snell in *The Discovery of Mind* (1953) makes a case for the self-recursive qualities that hide in words, acting like keys to doorways

that open other worlds. The purpose of perfecting the trivium was to convey clarity in expression, a vital step to graduate before commencing the exact skill of inquiry by the dialectic. The message was to perceive everything as it actually is: interwoven. There are periods and thinkers in history, throughout the Middle Ages, from the Renaissance to Idealism, Romanticism and Transcendentalism, as well as in other timelines and cultures that espouse these holistic-type views. Currently, it is becoming productive to invest in philosophical research that renders innovative and interactive projects to further expound on these connections. My future work will side-venture into re-envisioning business and leadership in the light of philosophy.

As it concerns our times, Alister McGrath suggests that natural philosophy is a much-needed “disciplinary imaginary” that can bring pluralistic worldviews into a correspondence on the whole (2022). He makes loose, but helpful links with Hermetic thought, without going into details for strategic distance. Some, like John Dillon, propose that the natural realm, as part of the physical, manifest reality, is itself contained in a larger metaphysics (Dillon 2012, 4). Stephen R. L. Clark’s counter-response would be that “naturalism was originally adopted for theological reasons” (2012, 40). Christian scholastics, in the Orthodox line, have sought to explain their tradition in alignment with an evolving “philosophy of nature in agreement with theological thinking” (Chirilă 2009, 179-180).

A cone-like spiral hierarchical perspective of existence that stems from an apophatic source is a helpful visual, for it directs our awareness to conceive a singularity-type point of origin that ties both beginnings and endings into infinite cycles of Being and non-Being. In collaboration with an artist, Casiana Vasiliu, from Transylvania, Romania, we attempted to depict these elusive elements in a composite visual media piece, on the *Mystery of Diotima* (2023). The path at the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, Greece, is cleverly decorated with the aforementioned symbolism, along the ascending and the descending walkways. In the end, the visitor arrives back at the entryway, which is also the exit.

Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) argues for circles and grades more and more condensed that finally reach the centre of the infinite, which is unformed (2009, 98). He infers a Plotinian-like “unmoved mover” that, nevertheless, sets in motion the eternal wheel of metamorphosis. This perspective could also accommodate the exploration of multiverses, each with their own unique forces and laws, colliding or entangling. You can see

why there would be room to add and improve on the study of the past and how it can enrich our present and future. We note, therefore, the possibility of contraries, first united, that may give birth to one another, applicable for the creation of the cosmos, in natural evolution and across domains of human thought.

Roger Penrose's Nobel Prize lecture in 2020 hints at "future past aeons" in ongoing series of 'big bangs' for a megaverse that may be woven together, as if stitched by living strings. Curiously, the legendary three sisters of fate (*moirai*) Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos, have long personified the spinning threads of genesis. With the help of technology, we have found concrete clues of a previous universe. Penrose sometimes refers to the anticipatory wisdom of the ancient Greeks, but he and others could make more precise connections from the texts. To show when modern theories are ancient predictions from their then present to the future is a form of retrodiction from our present to the past. In other words, some discoveries are already either previously articulated or vaguely introduced, but they remain not credited nor recognised accordingly. Moreover, the same laws are shown to repeatedly govern both the person and our universe. But what about inter-universal laws and other dimensions? The good news is that, at least, on the incipient basis of commonality we can peer into unknown horizons.

The ancients understood that the arduous process of empirical training of multiple intelligences was preliminary to the next, most difficult stage of intellectual reasoning that encompasses a complete knowledge. It is only now that we are coming to realise that the knowledge of the whole means knowledge of the Self, a trans-personal reality. Notice that I did not write 'impersonal' on this occasion. With the allegories of the *Divided Line* and the *Cave* (*Republic*, books VI and VII), Plato refers to the process of turning the soul from the world of becoming to the brilliant light of Being. At the peak, a sudden illumination by the 'light of lights' overtakes the soul. Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (1154-1191), a Persian visionary mystic, writes extensively on these subjects. Here, the soul encounters 'at-once' that which is nothing less than itself, the Self.

The supernal light defines the natural light that happens to also make up the spectrum of multiple intelligences. It seems to have the ability to reconcile diversity from a superior vantage point. The highest contemplation, beyond the light, can and should be further transcended into its source. If done correctly, an inversion, from the origin, would then

follow. This cyclical pattern bears symbolic resemblance to other phenomena in nature, for example, imagine the workings of a solar eclipse. The utmost realised mode of Being, in this case a so-called totality, instantly affects oneself and the others. At the culminating point, the centrality merges all things into One. It could be said that even duality, inclusive of the 'I-thou' relation, becomes One. Subsequently, fragmentations are united as cohesive parts into the whole. The dialectical procedure in the practice of Socratic midwifery can discover similar successions that might take shape in the human psyche. The *Interdisciplinary Research in Counselling, Ethics and Philosophy* journal publishes verifiable data on these topics. And yet, we must wonder: is Self-knowledge an achievement that can actually be had? And what about wisdom (σοφία)?

We read over and over again, in a variety of classical texts, that it takes resilience to ascend from the many to the ineffable One and then to return to the world, in an effort to systematically explicate the unknown. This would mean to traverse, then to understand how contraries interact either in antithetical, alternative, or complementary manners across various plane fields of reality. Again, after attaining the ultimate, by the power of all the studies combined, one must come back to everyday life in order to maintain and to cultivate virtue according to philosophy. This quest is the hero's (ἥρωες) journey, recently much popularised by the mythology of Joseph Campbell, itself inspired from the ancient lore. The make-up of the real hero, or heroine, includes *eros*, love, the great messenger, or *daīmon*, at work between intelligible and existential interactions.

*"Such a solemn sign
I shall obey, and thee,
O god unknown!"* (Virgil 1908, para. 21-44, 292)

But many, so-called heroes, if frenzied by confusion, fail to look deeply at their needs and, if they lack philosophy "to the world of ghosts are sent down" (Ibid., 519-542, 315). Need (necessity, reigned over by Ananke), must be emphasised, is the *daīmon*'s omen. Verse XXXII from *Il Canzoniere* by Luigi Tansillo (1510-1568), an Italian poet from the Petrarchian school, studied by Giordano Bruno, underlines the toils of a seeker caught in the tension between temporal and eternal principles. In the excerpt below, I try to translate and to interpret Tansillo's illustration of a fantastic "love" that can take over someone, impairing his or her cognitive grasp, like a paralysing possession.

*"Charmed, pleasing wound,
flaming arrow of Eros,
cast from beauty's celestial bow,
radiating through the soul,
what spell, what sweet grass
could heal the heart, now ashes?
[...] the cure, nothing but pain."*

We note the irony in a regalia of wounds in the name of a type of love that remains unclear and confused. We can safely intuit that if, and when, there is a lack of philosophy, false conclusions could be drawn from a powerful experience, a collision of opposites, that plays on human empathy. An unconscious participation in such event could result in dissociative consequences upon oneself, in relation to another, or the others and it can further exert influence on the world-at-large via intellectual breakdowns. Some of these ramifications are discussed in this paper. Nonetheless, we should heed the cautionary tale to not mistake the certitude of misunderstanding for actual knowledge. Also, when love is in question, it should unveil the truth, whilst steadfastly working through contraries and contrasts, to arrive in "the still point at the centre of turning worlds" to quote T.S. Eliot, which is heroic in the way of wisdom.

Love is a real encounter with the truth in oneself and in the other. The philosopher prepares to die to death and to be reborn, detached from the turmoil of irrational pain and suffering. We can see why the quadrivium and the trivium are crucial-- to provide the proper training that leads up to the practice of philosophy. Moreover, I think it is important to beware of the prophecy that is a confession of a personal supernatural belief stemming from human assertions, which gets projected outwards with great energy. In some sense this would be similar to the likes of subjective Stoicism, and in psychology, this process would be called "inflation" as it renders the "rosy-glow of illusions" (Jung 1964, para. 674, 356) that eludes one's ability to reason clearly about reality and about what might be the cause of such phenomenon.

Surely, we have all met a person who seems nice or generous and "sways with soothing speech the people's will" (Virgil 1908, para. 149-157, 8). These kinds of references, perhaps even more accentuated, occur in some of the oldest writings by Homer, who went through great lengths to examine and expose the underpinnings of human nature. Like Homer came to see, false metaphysical and conceptual image-thinking, excluded from

comprehending the conditions for their existence, and the larger context in which they form, confers discord and personal dissonance. The consequences from these limited modes of operation may include a human's inflexible conviction to idiosyncratic isolation wrapped up in separatist ideologies. The aftermath of the Renaissance into the age of Enlightenment is resplendent with such examples that would fill volumes.

Proper metaphysics is a "technique for waking up the soul" (Hedley 2000, 105). For all misperception, as we have said, there is always a *genius*, what the Greeks called *daīmon* (δαίμων), the tutelary deity whose voice is the *logos* of Self, calling the soul to see the 'true lies' (Plato, *Republic*, 382a) that have deceived it with either "false hopes and fair glozing words" (Virgil 1908, 337-357, 17) or rage or sorrow. This divine agent reminds a person to re-turn (ἐπιστρέφω) to the truth. You can see that the theme of 're-turning' is repeating. The *daīmon* communicates in dreams by the symbolic language of the truth, an area that deserves more attention and scrutiny. Bruno considered the *logos* as a 'code' of transformation (2009, 17). Our inspired guide "is the healer of his time, because anything he reveals of the eternal is healing" (Jung 1964, para. 1004, 526). The *daīmon* is an interlocutor, an intermediary, a porter with access to incommensurable dimensions.

For the ancients, division was surpassed by a summing up; divergence and convergence were seen as functioning in sync, like parts that make up a whole. This is not foreign to Plato's challenge in the *Parmenides*. This outlook is gradually being revived and appropriated in new trends of broader scholarship as evidenced in my paper. It is a response to the narrower specialist antiquated methods, borrowed from Medieval scholasticism, that focus to a fault, more and more on less and less (McGrath 2022). The common partition between distinct fields of study, with no apparent relationship among them, is a reductionist attempt to impoverish understanding and to dissuade individuals from polyvalent undertakings. It is a pernicious, oppressive tactic that inhibits or stalls cooperation. Michael Bonner in his book, *In Defense of Civilization* (2023) says, "nowadays the full exercise of all human faculties by a single person seems strange" to most who avoid it. I suggest that multiple intellectual disciplines should steadily come together in a dialogical exchange. It is not excluded that by their prolonged symbiotic engagement, multiplicity could eventually consolidate onto 'the One'. And One associates with Self.

While it sounds complicated to the modern, the concise purpose of the Hellenistic approach in question is to elevate the intellect by a layered

participation of material aspects of reality all the way to their essence, summed up in one active term '*ousia*'. Some might summarise ancient philosophy as teaching the mind to know the mind, but not limited to the mind. And, as we can see, examining personal experiences is central in the context of the whole. The practice of philosophy should incorporate all the ways of knowledge up to wisdom (as it pertains to Self, one way or another) uniquely attuned to each mode of life.

The Neo-Platonists remain largely misunderstood in academic circles. They come with great depth of analysis regarding the interweaving of natural and immaterial causes. They wrote about the dynamics and the connecting points between irreconcilable worlds, including matter and anti-matter, or immanence and transcendence, that seem to bleed into each other. The majority of so-called "star-stuff" is still an enigma to us. In *Transcendent Brain*, Alan Lightman does a good job in poetically synthesising the notions reviewed so far:

If you could tag each of the atoms in your body and follow them backward in time, through the air that you breathed during your life, through the food that you ate, back through the geological history of Earth, through the ancient seas and soil, back to the formation of the Earth out of the solar nebular cloud, and then out into interstellar space, you could trace each of your atoms, those exact atoms, to particular massive stars in the past of our galaxy. At the end of their lifetimes, those stars exploded and spewed out their newly forged atoms into space, later to condense into planets and oceans and your body at this moment. (2023)

It might be tempting to assume that these micro-macro-cosmic premises function under the banner of idealism, but that would be a fallacy. Though we find examples, for instance by Virgil (70-19 BCE), who alluded to "thou thy seest universal nature moved by universal mind" (1908, xii) that nourishes "one Life" (Ibid., 709-730, 212), it should not be taken to signify a totalitarian conceptualist model. It is only meant to highlight 'one' among many layers of reality. Douglas Hedley describes idealism as a doctrine "determined by *a priori* subjectivity", yet not of an "anti-realist" position (2000, 4, 24).

Under a misperceived opinion, even Campbell's hero's journey, or indeed any "philosophy" can become a form of over-generalisation and an over-simplified version, reified into a convenient supremacist dogma. Just

because reality, in its fullness, can be discerned by the processes of the mind, it should not be defined in terms of a product of the mind (Addey 2012, iii). Raymond Tallis, a neuroscientist and theological commentator, ever since his *Aping Mankind: Neuromania, Darwinitis and the Misrepresentation of Humanity* (2014), makes some keen arguments against reductionism and self-contradictory ontological speculations.

And, as explained earlier, we find evidence that to the ancient thinkers whatever comes into existence is not deemed to represent the highest level, for it is only one side superseded by an unseen, independent, apophatic, indescribable source. Pseudo-Dionysius' (late 5th century) *Theologia Mystica* and his *Ten Letters* employs a dialectical negation, that can be validated in experience, to gradually reveal and explain the paradox. It is a spiritual exercise to realise the Self by transcendence in the One. This process is true for the individual and for the cosmos. The 'One Self' is cleverly hidden and sometimes explicitly referenced in Plato's dialogues, including the first hypothesis of *Parmenides* at 137b under the terms 'ἐνὸς αὐτοῦ'. It denotes a region outside of creation and beyond space-time.

Theoretical physicists and astrophysicists, among which Stephen Hawking, building on Albert Einstein's hypotheses, some derived from philosophers, among whom David Hume (1711-1776), have specified that the universe's boundary is exceeded by a "no boundary condition". We can see that contemporary revolutionary findings improve on aspects of knowledge from the past, but many still do not loop it backward for meaning onto the Self. There are a few emerging, eclectic bodies of work by Pierre Grimes and Regina L. Uliana in *Philosophical Midwifery* (1998) and in the *APPA Journal* (2023), that look to evaluate aspects of these possibilities. Back to Allen and Snell, we are reminded that while some may read ancient literature as mere text, others experience it as a live awakening unconfinable to the page.

As we are winding down to the conclusion, the case of the Self that proceeds from the One, is a theme tangentially picked up also in analytical psychology where, in 1964, C.G. Jung states that the Self "is not only in me but in all beings" (para. 843, 463). Self-realisation, however, is not possible without proper psychic adaptation and the kind of inner and outer training, as we have previously mentioned to have involved the quadrivium and the trivium. It would be safe to state that ultimately, we cannot escape "the symbol of the Self, of absolute wholeness" (Ibid., para. 806, 424). Jung infuses psychology with a kind of wonder similar to Snell,

but in different fields, by using words, such as 'Self' that invokes a state of transportation and perhaps of inner transposition. He is aware that the word, as *Logos*, penetrates the psyche like the arrow of truth. In *Philosophical and Psychological Approach to Life*, he states that "ideas have, however, the unfortunate but inevitable tendency to lag behind the changes in the total situation" of the times (Jung 1964, para. 549, 284).

We should remember, however, that the denotations in the words that frame our searches have connotations and if we reflect on their deeper meanings, we may come to *see* and feel the pulse of ancient wisdom in our present. It would be proper, at this stage, to pause and discern whether we detect syncretism at play in past-present-future intellectual spheres and even across cultures that have assimilated several originally discrete thought systems. This paper, besides highlighting the personal-cosmic link, also advocates for interdisciplinary dialogue by retrieving the quadrivium and trivium. This solution would elevate us from the confinements of fashionable expertisms, unusable outside their demarcated line of business. In this way, we would have a better chance at orienting ourselves towards an integrated focus on Self-knowledge.

Due to the limits on space, this report was only able to briefly indicate a variation of the classical 'one-many' problem with its reception today. I tried to convey that it would be beneficial to continue to apply the ideas of ancient wisdom in modern domains of thought, across the sciences and humanities. Our synoptic challenge remains to find a grand 'theory of everything' that harmonises knowledge in relation to the metaphysical Self. It may be that the law of destiny will aid us to inch closer toward the threshold for that ideal.

The ordinary man and woman, reborn like a phoenix by the love of wisdom, can become exceptional and heroic, gaining extraordinary habits and thoughts to lead a meaningful life (Bruno 2009, 95). Our task is, as the Latin saying goes "*ad vitam, non ad horam*"-- for life not just for our times. Thus, we conclude that the ideas of our ancestors are relevant for us, for we are not disjointed from their lineage, which is very much alive in the present, like an oracular message carved on a numinous thread for the future. Humanist Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406) decisively wrote, "I must imitate antiquity not simply to reproduce it, but in order to produce something new." Lastly, to paraphrase Virgil, we must each travel on in a quest to trace our origins beyond the stars.

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