

# The *Wednesday*

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Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford



## Editorial

### *Diagnosis of Our Time*

I have been reading German Idealism with a dedicated group of scholars for more than a decade. We are currently reading Fichte's 1806 set of public lectures published under the title *The Characteristics of the Present Age*, which explains his mature philosophy of history and religion. These were followed by a set of lectures that concentrated on religion and were entitled *The Way Toward the Blessed life*. Both sets of lectures are fascinating in the scope of their topics and method of analysis. I found them relevant to our time, because of Fichte's diagnoses of the period since the Enlightenment, which he calls the present age. I will leave his philosophy of religion, or the blessed life, to another occasion.

Fichte sees history unfolding over five distinct periods (epochs) or ages, based on the actualisation of reason in history. In the first age, instincts dominate reason and he calls it reason-instinct. This is a stage where consciousness is still primitive and humanity was close to reason in the animal stage where actions were done intuitively and without comprehension. The second age comes when some individuals distinguish themselves, gain power over the rest of their contemporaries, and sometimes have more knowledge. They use their limited reason to impose their rationality over others. The third stage is a skeptic one where the individual overthrows authority, and becomes suspicious of all reason. In the fourth age, reason takes hold of reality and shows itself through science. Humanity gains knowledge, but it has to convert it into life, to act accordingly, build institutions and live a life guided by reason. This is the actualisation of reason and the completion of a full development, from the dominance of instincts to the triumph of reason.

Fichte thinks there is a plan right from the beginning and this plan is one of reason seeking to actualise itself, so that humanity builds all its relations according to reason. The human species is an idea that should be honoured and valued above the individual. It is the idea of the species, and we may understand it in more recent terms as degeneration, if people do not live up to the idea, and do not embody it in their outlook and actions. This idea is echoed in the writing of many philosophers and writers of the end of the nineteenth century, most notably Nietzsche. Such a failure, Nietzsche called decadence. It is also worth mentioning that the skepticism of the third age has also been called nihilism.

Jacobi, a contemporary of Fichte, was credited with the term, but it may have predated him, and it was made popular later on by Nietzsche. We can identify the rejection of authority with the Enlightenment - Kant's essay *What is Enlightenment?* could be cited here. One could claim that nihilism is still with us today. In the eighties of the last century it was debated whether we need more of the Enlightenment or less. In either case, both sides of the debate are still, according to Fichte's analysis, talking about individual reason - reason rooted in the individual - and not the individual rooted in reason. The latter is a different kind of reason, which can be described as unified, independent, eternal and self-sufficient - in other words, God..

Fichte thinks that the individual in the third age is cut off from the ground of reason in the sense described above, and hence has nothing to fall back on but experience and his empirical existence. In such a situation the individual becomes more important than the species, and all *a priori* thinking will be disdained and frowned upon, moving away from speculative thinking and philosophy to empiricism and experience. The individual will be most concerned with self-preservation and egoism. This might be covered by a bit of philanthropy, but it is an altruism based on pity that creates a sense of concern towards humanity, although in reality it is just a boost to the self-image and not a genuine feeling of unity with the species. Art will be degenerate, catering for entertainment or fashion. Politics and law will become haphazard and experimental, looking for ground in dead past cases. The idea of utility and personal happiness will be valued above all else, and religion itself becomes a doctrine of happiness.

Fichte's focus is this lack of a shared belief, this fragmented individuality, consumerism, and the triviality of all sacred values. This is as true of our time as it was of his. The distance of time between us and Fichte's does not invalidate the argument that we are still living in a period that has not thought its case through and has not moved forward towards more rationality in building institutions, achieving justice and equality on several fronts, from production and distribution to social tolerance, and a belief in one humanity, one idea, that should be lived in the One. I hope to write more on this next time.

*The Editor*

# An Odyssey Of The Self

**Jonael Schickler regards the Human Self as a project in process of becoming the universal I-AM. This is a Metaphysics of Christology which equates knowledge with Being. Unapologetically and needless to say, this challenges our current material and scientific paradigm as our window on the world.**

## WILLIAM BISHOP

German Idealism, with its concern for the self-conscious 'I', flourished during the period from Kant to Hegel yet failed to reach a satisfying logical consummation. However, a relatively recent doctoral thesis from Cambridge University *arguably* supplies this. Although it may stretch present-day credulity it warrants careful consideration. The manuscript by Jonael Schickler, whose ideas I present, was published as a book by Ashgate in 2005 and completed just before the author's death in the Potters Bar rail accident. It is titled *Metaphysics as Christology: An Odyssey of the Self from Kant and Hegel to Steiner*.

Ontology, as a branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature of being, has been largely neglected since the time of Aristotle, who mentions in *De Anima* four levels of being: physical body, vegetative soul, sensitive soul, and intellectual soul. These interconnected domains of being are vital and necessary ontological conditions in Schickler's conception of the *Odyssey of the Self*.

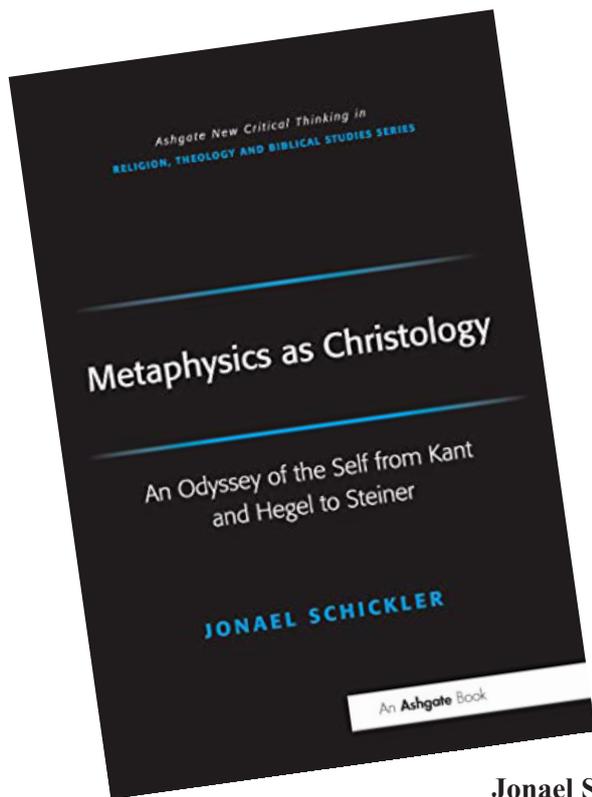
Philosophy in recent years has seen the death or loss and fragmentation of the concept of the self, but the positive result of this can be that now a new human self-understanding can emerge, and it is in this sense that Schickler's manuscript is relevant. Employing a loosely dialectic structure, the book takes Kant's transcendental idealism as thesis, Hegel's absolute idealism as antithesis, and Steiner's anthroposophy as the synthesis, where Rudolf Steiner is presented as a genuine inheritor of the central problems of Idealist philosophy. In a concluding section, Nietzsche appears as *antithesis* to Hegel as *thesis* and Steiner as the *synthesis*, which leads to Christology. Schickler points to the need to go beyond the opposition between Kant's transcendental idealism and Hegelian dialectic, to an expanded anthropological ontology. His grounds for this are philosophical, though the ontology that is introduced relies on research of Rudolf Steiner and others into aspects of reality hidden from the ordinary senses. This can be seen to meet the aims of German Idealism since it presents, possibly for the first time in the Western tradition, a fully immanent conception of

the relations between self, body, and world.

Philosophy in the modern period, particularly in Germany, has reflected a series of stages in the gradual incarnation of a modern self, starting from a thinking substance separated from extended matter. This begins in modern philosophy with Descartes' 'I think, therefore I am'. The 'I think' links the 'I' and thinking with being. Later Fichte asserts a self-positing 'I' that finds definition against what is 'not-I'. Then Schelling and Hegel define an absolute subject as one that immediately and necessarily has itself for its object.

For Steiner, Kant's transcendental epistemology falls short in that while it unifies epistemology and transcendental logic it excludes ontology, believing that man's consciousness cannot reach the ground of the thinking process in itself. But this is successfully overcome when it becomes a transcendental ontology. On the other hand for Steiner, Hegel's dialectic is insufficiently ontological. It is in the domain of the Soul - defined by Hegel as the unity of universal and individual life - that an ontological basis can be established between Nature and Spirit instead of Logic. Hegel concentrates on thinking as Spirit at the expense of feeling. The Self that unifies subject and object includes feeling, and presupposes mind-body and mind-world relations. If the rational is an actual fully mediated unity of subject and object, this unity is achieved not within thinking alone.

The faculty of cognition for Kant is the source of a particular kind of representation, and he accepts that it is impossible to understand the relation between the organs of the perceived body and our cognitive faculties, for example between the brain and sense organs and thinking, without the imagining. Although we think and perceive, in ordinary experience we do not think and perceive our thinking and perceiving. Hence Kant concludes that the cognitive faculties must be constituted beyond our consciousness. Steiner's answer to how the cognitive faculties become genuine objects of cognition is to develop, through special meditations,



**Jonael Schickler and his posthumously published book**

a heightened level of attention at the activity of this faculty. Steiner's claim is that knowledge of different levels of being is possible so that epistemology does not need to be limited by deference to a lofty and unattainable ontology. In reaction to Kant and Hegel, Steiner introduces an ontology intrinsic to *life*, the level of Aristotle's 'vegetative soul', which is a conception of the etheric body and etheric world as a whole, that which 'animates' the physical (material). This is, for Steiner, a transcendental condition of the physical world that emerges from it. An ontology distinctive of sensation is fulfilled by the astral world (Aristotle's 'sensitive soul' level above the etheric world). And above the astral world, according to Steiner, is the spiritual world (Aristotle's intellectual soul'), home of the true absolute subject or 'I = I'. This is the sphere intrinsic to thought and is the most fundamental ontology underlying the others.

Steiner's extended ontology: mineral, plant, animal, and human, provides a means of understanding the synthesis of dialectic and transcendentalism. The cognitive faculties - of thinking, observing, perceiving, imagination and so on - may be conceived as different organs of the single absolute subject which has extended itself in a process of historical unfolding in the world and the human condition. It is only if such a subject is conceived that we can unite a transcendental ontology - that is, the claim that experience is transcendently

constituted in one way or another by levels of being corresponding to life experienced and thought - with the demand of dialectic - that reality should be thought as an absolute unity of subject and object. Indeed, just as the sense organs over time have crystalized out of the physical body, so other faculties have the potential to crystalize within the astral body. Normal human consciousness today only extends to the astral body (or soul) where we are conscious of our sensations, perceptions, and feelings.

### **Self-Overcoming**

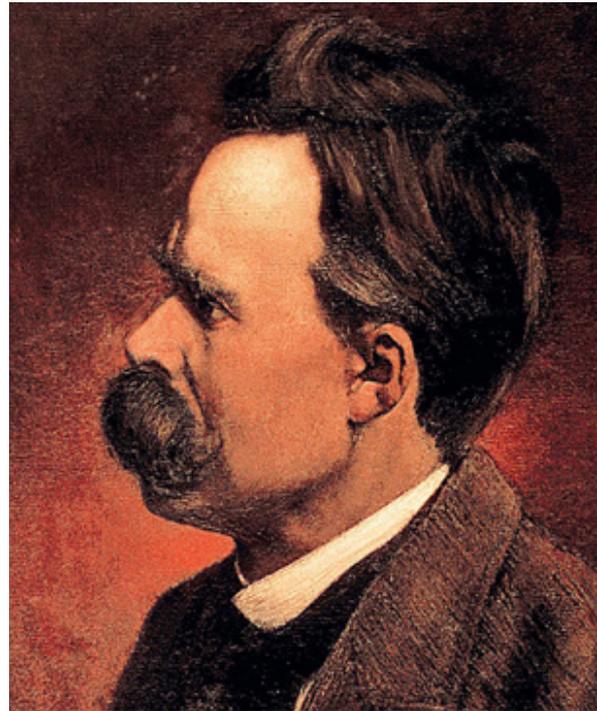
Nietzsche identified the Self with the body where the ego and the faculties are playthings of the Self, and Steiner's Christology identifies the transcendental Self with the body, but potential and not actual body-self. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Nietzsche says: 'You say "I" and you are proud of this word. But greater than this - although you will not believe it - is your body and its great intelligence, which does not say "I" but performs "I"'. ... Behind your thoughts and feelings, my brother, stands a mighty commander, an unknown sage - he is called Self. He lives in your body, he is your body'.

Schickler suggests that for Steiner, due to development over time, at our present stage in human evolution, the body, the first developmental stage in the human evolutionary level of being, contains more intelligence than is accessible to the ego, which is a more recent

## Philosophy



Hegel



Nietzsche

evolutionary development and therefore still at an under-developed stage. Such development is analogous to an organic process. Man's physical body is therefore only potentially, but not yet actually, his Self. Hence prior to the attainment of this actuality, the physical body is a transcendent Self for man. Steiner agrees with Nietzsche that relative to man's possibilities his spirit or ego-sense is in many ways an instrument of a transcendent Self. What is relevant here is that a central idea of Christology is that Self and body are essentially one. The Self-overcoming of Nietzsche can therefore be interpreted as its own opposition in the form of the spirit-matter division.

### Resurrection

Two years after the publication of his first critique, Kant delivered *Lectures on Rational Psychology* (1783), stating that after death and casting off the body, the soul will perceive the 'thing-in-itself' for what it is. Kant was familiar with the esoteric ideas of Swedenborg which may have influenced his view of immortality: 'When thus the machine that is the body is destroyed so that the soul can no longer function in it, then animal life ends but not the spiritual'. Resurrection is necessary in the thought process, the physical into the mental, and can be seen to result from the impact of the universal being of Christ (as I-AM) on the unfolding of human consciousness. This is not a partisan religious view but an acknowledgment of the universal significance within

Being of Christ for humanity as a whole. *Metaphysics as Christology* depends upon the possibility of the resurrection of a physical body and the physical world in general, understood as the attainment of a fully mediated synthesis of subject and object, as a necessary condition of ordinary thought and experience.

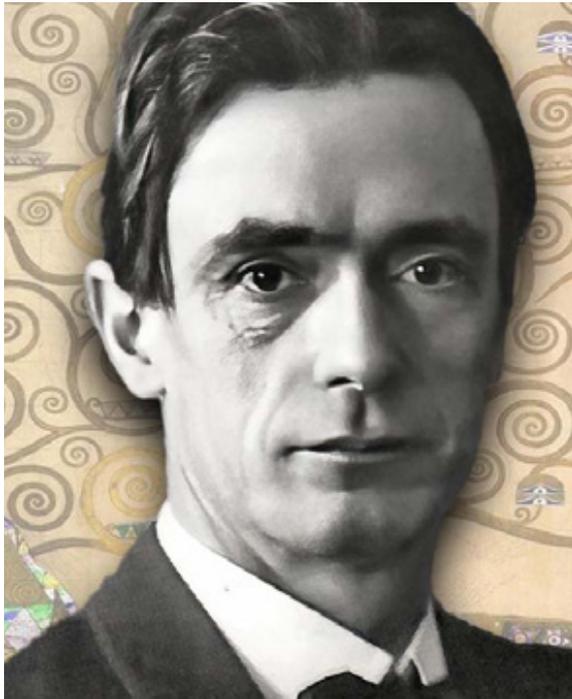
### Schickler's Summary

'The basic impulse of metaphysical transcendentalism is the search for knowledge of necessary conditions of the possibility of thought and experience. In Kant's thought this impulse is framed largely in terms of subject-object and thought-sense oppositions.

The dialectical method of thought discovers a basic threefold logic in the relations between fundamental philosophical concepts. These demonstrate that a rational world is one in which the opposition of subject and object is overcome. A possible state of transcendence of the subject-object opposition is hence a necessary condition of the possibility of thought and experience.

The synthesis of transcendentalism and dialectic states that a possible mediated unity of subject and object is the necessary condition of the possibility of thought and experience.

Since such a unity is given in the idea of resurrection,



**Rudolf Steiner**

the possibility of the resurrection as the mediated synthesis of spirit and matter is the necessary condition of the possibility of thought and experience.

If Christ indeed actualized this possibility, then the Christ-condition or level of being is potentially the most real or dialectically complete state of existence for every self-conscious being – i.e. every being for whom there is a subject-object division.’

### **In Conclusion**

Only if the thinking act takes itself for its content can it hope to expose the deeper processes that thinking itself conceals. What transforms this project into Christology is that it reaches completion when the subject of thought - the initially fragile ego of human consciousness - manages to strip away all of those suppositions which conceal it from itself. Were this to be achieved man’s knowledge of his knowing would be completed, and man’s thinking - or consciousness as a whole - transformed into unconditional being.

A fuller synthesis of subject and object, or the subject’s reunifying itself with its predicate, would see the ego reaching down into the material sphere, unifying itself with the conscious processes that constitute the ordinary physical matter of our experience from far beyond ordinary human consciousness. This is nothing less than the capacity to resurrect a body - that is, the capacity of a self-conscious subject to find itself in its other, or its

subjectivity in its objectivity all the way down to the material level. This is, of course, what Christ is supposed to have achieved when he arose from the grave.

In the image of the resurrection we also encounter the idea of a fully realized self-knowledge, of knowing which has become being in the most complete sense. The faculty that achieves this for man must be an unactualized potential buried within him, as what we might call his unrealized Christ-nature. In man’s current cognitive condition the synthesis of spirit and sense, of form that has died into matter and comes back to life in human thinking, is achieved most immediately through the imagination. It might be said that in our imagination we play out the drama of resurrection, of the basic logic of our cosmos. The resurrection itself would then be imagination become fully ontological: the concept of God reaching into its self-alienated matter in an act of reunification and self-overcoming.

That the object is a self-alienated subject is demonstrated by its being impossible to conceive the object without the subject. It is for the subject to know the object in and for itself, for it to know that it is the object (Novalis: ‘I am you’). However to acquire such self-knowledge, thinking and being would have to be fully unified. To achieve this, thinking must undergo a transformation in the direction of new cognitive faculties. This conclusion may come as a surprise, yet Steiner’s vision of man signals the birth of an understanding of the man-God, Christ, in his full immanence. This understanding can be nothing less than a metaphysics of resurrection that shows death itself in the end as an illusion. Metaphysics is thus transformed into Christology when it is recognized that its highest attainment as the life of pure thought - a demonstration that ultimate reality must be a fully mediated synthesis of subject and object, or spirit and matter - must become the motivating impulse for the search for a knowledge of being which can slowly turn the possibility of resurrection into an actuality. The evolution of consciousness assumed here is that of a painstakingly slow incarnation of the Self from initial potential (as seed) to final full actualization. The end in view lies far in the future, but in the meanwhile this odyssey of the Self inevitably has to negotiate the hazards of Scylla and Charybdis along the way.

A supporting thought for this take on the odyssey of the Self is expressed in Blackwell’s *A Companion to Heidegger*, in speaking of the central message of *Contributions*: ‘That only when thinking can experience, understand, and articulate the nature of its own dependency upon and belonging to being is a new beginning in philosophical thinking possible’.

## The lady poet in the wildflower garden

In a wildflower garden,  
where colours clash and blend,  
she wanders, barefoot,  
flowers, each a voice,  
a verse that only she  
will understand.

Sunlight dapples her thoughts,  
as bees hum in  
the rhythm of her untamed heart.  
She bends,  
and plucks a fragile stem,  
holds it so lightly, as if it were akin  
to a green sapphire gem  
with words unfurling  
like tendrils, and uncurling  
all blooms within -

Here, in this step of life,  
she finds her stride,  
the freedom call,  
that tells her, who she is:  
wearing a crown  
of unique spirit blossoms  
in pink and white -  
with memories and feelings,  
all her own.



7

*Poem and Artwork by Scharlie Meeuws*

# Evil and Time

**As children, we are all taught the story of Adam and Eve. It seems straightforward: the devil approaches Eve, tricks her into eating the forbidden fruit, and ushers in the Fall. On the surface, this is a cute fable to teach children right from wrong. But with closer inspection, we can unlock some key elements which unfold into deep philosophical meaning.**

## DAN MCARDLE

Almost any Western study of the origin of evil requires visiting the *Book of Genesis*. In Chapter two, we see God issuing commands and establishing what we come to recognise as the Garden of Eden. Chapter three begins, quite literally, with the serpent. There are variations in translation: some English translations begin with ‘And the serpent’, ‘Now the serpent (New King James Version), ‘But the serpent (Wycliffe Bible)’, or simply ‘The serpent’ (Living Bible). In German, the 1522 Luther translation begins ‘Und die Schlange’ (and the snake), while the much later 2000 Schlachter translation begins ‘Aber die Schlange’ (but the snake). Finally, the Latin Vulgate begins ‘Sed et serpens’ (but the serpent).

Right away, there are some interesting things to note. First, the selected Latin, the German, and various English translations, also French, all identify this entity as some sort of crawling thing. The Latin and many English translations suggest a more general ‘serpent’ while the German translations often follow Luther’s lead and call it a snake. Second, there is a clear transition going on here. Consider: the previous chapter was setting up a new world, and the very first word of the next chapter announces a sort of disruption. In all previous declarations, God was announcing new elements, similar to introducing new cast members in a play.

Up to this point, all action and speech has been either from God, or an acknowledgement from creations of God of His goodness. Now

we suddenly have a character speaking in an independent manner *not* in direct accordance with the will of God, and it is such a profound change that it prompts a new chapter and introduces this new word, ‘sed’ in the Latin. Thus, we have a disruption both at the level of narrative - that is, word and chapter - and the first challenge to God’s authority. Finally, we have the introduction of evil, which falls in accordance with Aristotle’s observation that in a complex tragedy, ‘the change of fortune involves a reversal or a discovery or both’. (*Poetics* I,1452a14 tr. Kenny)

What kind of change is this? If we accept as complete our lessons from Sunday school, it is the introduction of evil into the world. Eve disobeys God, who kicks them out, ushering in horrible things like suffering and death. But this seems a bit simplistic and overly deterministic. Eve *may* have disobeyed God – joined in disobedience by Adam, who was standing right next to her – but if God actually saw that all of these things were good, why would an ‘evil’ serpent be creeping around the Garden in the first place?

If we assume the serpent represents evil, then we also need to ask precisely *when* did evil enter into the story. If evil was there all along in the form of the serpent, then the all-knowing God was incorrect to say that everything was good. If evil only entered when Eve made the choice to disobey God, then was evil in Eve, or in the choice itself? Put another way, could the lesson of this passage be that free will is evil?



Adam, Eve and the serpent

But if that is the case, then giving a choice at all would be in itself evil, meaning that the only good is mindless obedience, makes no sense.

One approach to answering this question is to raise another: what exactly *is* a choice? To fully exercise free will, to make a choice, requires a multi-stage process. It begins with the stage before we are confronted with a choice, followed by the choice itself, then our action of actually making the choice, and finally, the stage where we have chosen. This is clearly what happens in this verse. The serpent emerges, offers a choice, Eve attempts to negotiate, and then chooses. But where does evil fit into this? It is clearly the second stage, which means that the initial stage of choice does not contain evil. Which also means that while evil is part of the choice process, it is *not* choice. What we have just witnessed is the introduction of time via the stages of a choice.

Interpreting the serpent as representing time, rather than evil, makes much more sense. Aristotle comments in his *Physics* that we use time to explain a lot of bad things, such as ageing, decaying, and dying, but not so many good things: ‘In its own right, time is responsible for destruction rather than for generation, because it is a number of change, and change removes present properties’. (Aristotle’s *Physics* Book IV 221b1, tr. Robin Waterfield). We will return to this point presently. If this is what the author of Genesis intended, we can view time as a conduit through which morality enters the world. But then we have to turn around and ask what *morality* is. Can morality exist only within time?

Let us reduce all of morality to a choice between good and evil. If we choose that which is good, we turn towards the good. If we choose that which is evil, then we turn towards the evil, which is also turning away from the

good. We might also say that choosing the good is turning away from evil, but this is not quite true here. In the stages of choice, at the very first stage, before choice, we are already in some given state. If that state is the Garden of Eden, then, with the first stage, we default to the good, and it is only with an active choice that we turn away from the good. This would then offer a logical conclusion that evil is the privation of, or turning away from, the good.

If evil can only exist within time, and good can exist both in time and outside of time, then we have to ask what ‘properties’ enable this difference. What other concepts share this distinction, where A exists only within time, while its opposite, B, can exist both within and without of time? Aristotle’s mentor Plato serves up a solid response to this, in dialogues like the *Laches* and *Charmides*, where the participants try, and mostly fail, to define concepts like courage and temperance. When discussing these themes, the default state most people desire is the good. For example, we want all soldiers who go into battle to display courage in theatre. When confronted with a choice – should I face my enemy and engage, or should I turn and run away in fear? – the ideal position would be to engage, and thus show courage, which helps orient towards the good. Thus, we might argue that the idea of courage alone can exist as a form outside of time, while cowardice only emerges when someone, within time, is forced to choose between courage and cowardice.

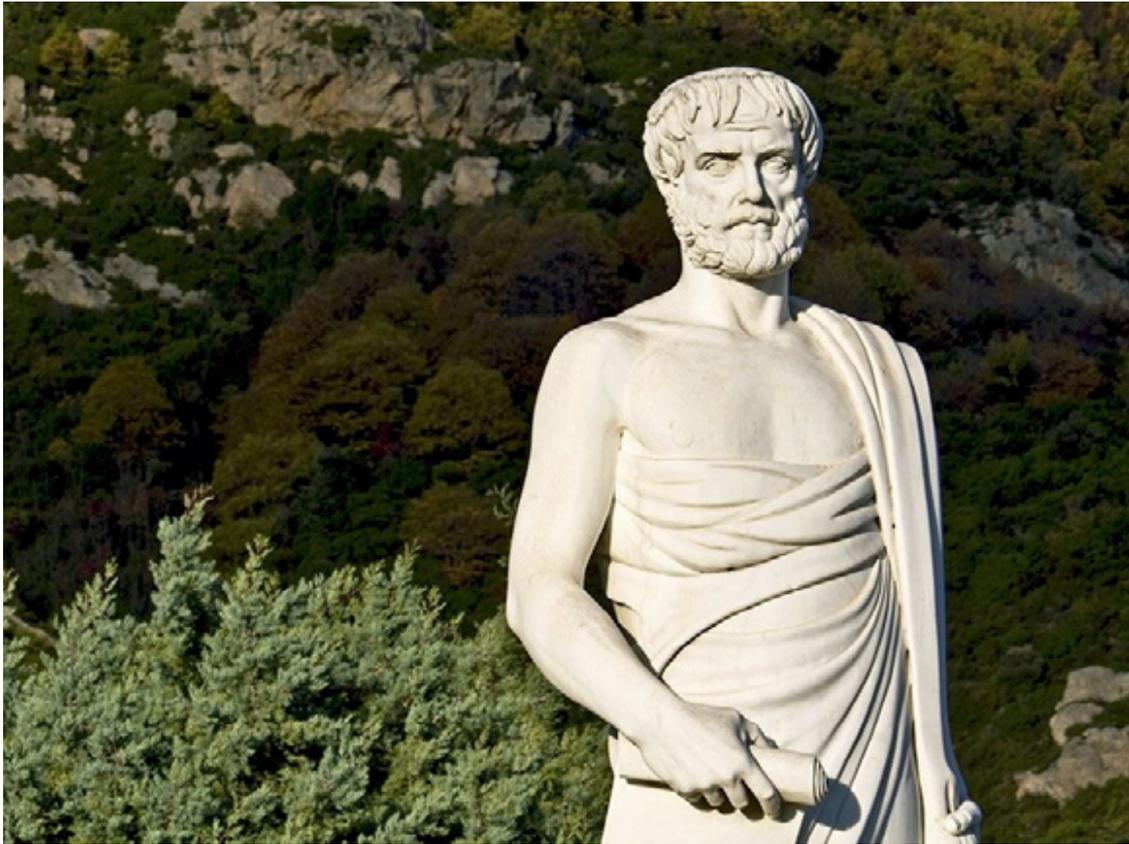
This brings us to a common theme in both Plato and Aristotle, the distinction between being and becoming. Returning to our quote from the *Physics*, we should ask what is meant by “present properties.” Where did these properties come from? If we are in the initial stage of our choice sequence, the present properties were those which existed before the choice. And if our proposal that the serpent represents time is correct, then the serpent also represents becoming, which means that

the state of nature as displayed by the Garden of Eden is the state of being, not becoming. And if this is true, it opens up a whole lot of new implications for us.

For example: if morality can only exist within time as a product of choice, then, when we step outside of time, morality cannot exist. When we follow this reasoning to its logical conclusion, the result is that good – Plato’s form of the Good – can exist alone outside of time in the realm of the being, while in the time-bound world of becoming, the physical world, good coexists with evil. But if that is true, then the entire material world is adulterated with the possibility of evil, which might explain why Socrates was so focused on the ‘soul’ as a link to the world of being, and why he was so willing to drink the hemlock to escape becoming. Still, we must remember that we speak only of the *possibility* of evil in the world of becoming, not a guarantee.

This interpretation also adds texture to Plato’s *Parmenides*, in which young Socrates is grilled by the old and wise Parmenides. Note how the dialogue plays with time: not only is there a massive age difference between the two main interlocutors, but the dialogue itself was delivered by Antiphon, who ‘can recite from memory the discussion that Socrates and Zeno and Parmenides once had’ (*Parmenides* 126b, tr. Gill and Ryan) many years in the past. We could argue that each retelling is a particular of the original, the Eden-like state when the discussion actually took place. If the first occasion serves to represent the one in the realm of being, then each retelling, with deviations and imperfect replications of that first occasion, becomes a particular, having a partial degree of participation in the totality of the form of the one.

Next, we should look at this through a phenomenological lens. When we are young children, an hour seems like a very long time. As adults, that same hour, and even a full day,



Aristotle

seems to pass by very quickly. As our lived experience and how we relate to the world matures, so in turn does our understanding of and perception of time. In other words, while time itself is objective and constant, the way in which we perceive it is not.

This would have been true for Eve. If the serpent was not simply an encounter with time, but her *first* encounter, then her choice, *the* first choice, would also represent the first existential dilemma. Notice how when the serpent asks her what God had commanded, her restatement of what she claims God said does not actually match what He said. We could view this as man falling short of understanding the divine, but we could also view this as Eve simply *forgetting* what God said, because time has passed and human memory is imperfect. Is faulty memory an artifact of Aristotle's 'destruction'?

Earlier, we asked whether free will could be evil. Although this is not the case – free will is our agency to choose between good and evil – can free will exist *without* evil?

Assuming that both free will and evil can only exist within time, the answer seems to be no. We might further suggest that the purpose of free will is to allow us to choose evil, which would then imply, as previously argued, that free will exists only to lead us to evil. This lines up with the Socratic paradox which states that no one knowingly does wrong, and this paradox would likely be correct, were choices made outside of time. But, as our choices exist within time, they rely on an understanding of morality, which improves with time and experience from past choices. This understanding informs future choices and ideally helps us align more often with good than with evil.

Thus, knowledge of good and evil can only exist through time: we cannot have this knowledge without agency, and agency cannot exist without time. Why was time present in the Garden? If God saw time itself as good, perhaps it was to teach us that agency is better than mindless obedience, and that to knowingly choose good requires us to recognise that the good exists.

# The Death of Socrates

DR. ALAN XUEREB

Few moments in the history of philosophy have been revisited as insistently as the death of Socrates. Yet familiarity often dulls the strangeness of the event. Socrates did not die as a rebel crushed by force, nor as a tragic hero resisting power. He died lawfully, calmly, and publicly executed by the very city whose ethical life he had spent his days examining. The difficulty for art, therefore, is not how to dramatise the moment, but how to remain faithful to its philosophical unease.

My *alto rilievo*, *The Death of Socrates*, approaches this scene not as spectacle but as structure. Conceived horizontally, it draws on the language of ancient friezes and funerary reliefs rather than Renaissance tableaux. The horizontal format denies vertical transcendence and heroic ascent. Socrates does not rise above the polis; he withdraws from it. The event unfolds within the city's own spatial and legal order.

The relief takes its philosophical bearings from Plato's *Phaedo* and *Crito*, though it resists illustration. Socrates is not identified by idealised features but by posture and stillness. His body is weakened, partially reclined, already yielding to gravity. The cup of hemlock, now empty, remains in his hand. This detail is crucial. It indicates that the sentence has already been carried out, not through enforcement, but through obedience. Socrates executes his own punishment out of a sense of duty, rendering physical coercion unnecessary.

Around him, the disciples are present yet inwardly fractured. One hides his face, unable to look; another bends inward, paralysed by grief; a third collapses close to the ground. Their gestures are restrained rather than theatrical. They do not console the dying philosopher, nor do they support one another. This is not a failure of love, but a failure of ethical readiness. The relief suggests that those closest to Socrates are not yet capable of fully inhabiting the life he has exemplified.

On the far left of the relief stands a fifth figure: an observer sent by the polis. He is not visibly armed. His presence presumes compliance rather than resistance, as if the city already knows that philosophers do not answer violence with force. Positioned at the threshold of the architectural frame, he stands half within and half outside the arches of authority. His posture conveys quiet unease rather than command. He has come to witness the execution of the sentence, yet finds himself witnessing something more disquieting: a man who needs no compulsion to obey the law that condemns him.

This figure plays a crucial ethical role. He is neither executioner nor judge, neither villain nor hero. He represents institutional authority reduced to observation. Power is present, but idle. In the face of Socrates' voluntary compliance, the mechanisms of enforcement become redundant. What unsettles the observer is not resistance, but conscience.

What binds these figures together is not intimacy, but architecture. The relief is structured by rigid frames, arches, and rectilinear forms that dominate the space. Architecture here is not neutral background; it is a moral presence. It represents *nomos* - the law of Athens - not as chaos or injustice, but as order functioning correctly. The execution is legal. The city remains intact. And it is precisely this correctness that gives the scene its tragic force.

In Plato's *Crito*, Socrates refuses to escape, arguing that to break the law would be to injure the city itself. Yet this obedience does not redeem the law; it exposes its limits. Visually, the relief stages this exposure. The architectural forms remain stable and authoritative, while the human figures appear vulnerable, contingent, and ultimately expendable. Law endures; care does not.



### Death of Socrates

The application of gold leaf intensifies rather than resolves this tension. Gold traditionally signifies permanence, sanctity, and justification. Here it envelops both human figures and architectural structure, refusing to distinguish moral innocence from institutional legitimacy. The surface is deliberately uneven, fractured, and resistant to polish. Light catches unpredictably, producing a splendour that is unstable and ethically ambiguous. The city shines even as it eliminates the voice that questioned it.

In this way, the relief speaks not only to antiquity but to a perennial problem: how societies can remain procedurally just while becoming ethically indifferent. The death of Socrates becomes a paradigm of lawful injustice, an event in which order persists while wisdom is expelled. Socrates' death did not give birth to philosophy; philosophy was already alive in his questioning, teaching, and way of life. What his death reveals, however, is philosophy's enduring vulnerability

within political structures. The relief suggests that philosophy becomes most visible not at moments of triumph, but at moments of loss, when a community realises, too late, that it has failed to care for the voice that sought to care for it.

There is no consolation offered in this scene. No visual assurance that reason prevails, no promise of redemption. The drama is deliberately unresolved. By working in *alto rilievo*, between sculpture and architecture, image and structure, the piece places the viewer in the position of the city itself: a witness to a lawful act that nonetheless leaves an ethical remainder.

Socrates drinks the hemlock calmly. The cup is empty. The observer waits. The city remains orderly. The gold still shines. And yet something essential has been lost, something no amount of legitimacy, splendour, or institutional correctness can restore.

*'I'll show you differences . . . . '*

*Hegel seems to me to be always wanting to say that things that look different are really the same. Whereas my interest is in showing that things which look the same are really different. I was thinking of using as a motto for my book a quotation from 'King Lear': 'I'll show you differences'. The remark 'you'd be surprised' wouldn't be a bad motto either.*

'I'll show you differences' – I cite King Lear.  
Good motto; runner up, 'you'd be surprised'.  
Both apt enough if we'd but ears to hear.

Kent sets the tone: uncouth, uncivilized!  
He'll have no fawning rogue mock Lear's estate.  
Good motto; runner-up, 'you'd be surprised'.

Stark mad, yet hold him at no lower rate.  
I stand with him, that trusty liegeman, Kent.  
He'll have no fawning rogue mock Lear's estate.

Who else but he foreknew the dire event,  
Lear and Cordelia dead, cosmos unhinged?  
I stand with him, that trusty liegeman, Kent.

They err who'd wink at differences infringed;  
Like Hegel, they'd ensure all ends the same.  
Lear and Cordelia dead, cosmos unhinged!

They'd soon dead-level every language-game,  
See sense undone and chaos come again.  
Like Hegel, they'd ensure all ends the same.



**CHRIS NORRIS**



### King Lear

Naught but disorder stalks that regimen!  
It's Edmund's, Goneril's, and Regan's realm.  
See sense undone and chaos come again.

No ordered set that they'd not overwhelm,  
Those would-be rulers, monarchs of misrule:  
It's Edmund's, Goneril's, and Regan's realm.

For their brave opposite, consult the Fool;  
Hear nonsense turn their discourse on its head,  
Those would-be rulers, monarchs of misrule.

'I'll show you differences': as soon as said,  
Kent's dictum tells us 'pay the Fool due heed,  
Hear nonsense turn their discourse on its head'.

'You'd be surprised', my second motto: read  
The play and learn from Kent, Fool, and mad Lear,  
Perhaps to your surprise, how follies plead  
We watch for wisdom's coastline to come clear.



**Frozen Seawater, Shelter Island, New York, February 2026**

*Photo by Virginia Knuri*

The *Wednesday* – Magazine of the Wednesday group.  
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