

# Atlas

The myth –  
metaphor for  
human being

‘Human being is empowered –  
to think and experience –  
the symmetry of the universe –  
and beyond –  
enabled to act upon this condition –  
appealing and supporting –  
creation –  
from an asymmetrical relation.’

‘Like Atlas’

A paper about –  
relations between myth –  
modern science –  
religion –  
and philosophy –  
a paradoxal –  
point of view.

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## Introduction

One of the most rich symbols of the paradoxical relation with reality is Atlas.

The statue of Atlas typically depicts the Titan from Greek mythology, carrying the celestial heavens on his shoulders. This image is rich in symbolic meaning.

Atlas is often seen as a symbol of immense burden and responsibility. In Greek mythology, he was punished by Zeus to hold up the sky for eternity. The statue represents the idea of carrying a heavy load or an immense responsibility, often without the possibility of relief.

We often see Atlas carrying earth. The true story is that Atlas has to support the celestial sky, and prevent heaven to fall (back to) earth. Atlas also symbolizes great strength and endurance. He represents the capacity to bear enormous challenges, judged to sustain such a burden over time.

In this article we will discuss some questions about the symbols Atlas enriches us with.

First, Atlas is a metaphor for the challenges and the burden of people during their lifetime. (Section 1)

Atlas is an example of a fundamental paradox we, humans, experience and perceptions. (Section 2)

Third, we will discuss several approaches in relation to this paradox: modern science, a religious metaphor and philosophical currents.

Finally, we will present an overview and personal considerations.

The paper creates and aims a more balanced view upon the relation of human being with reality. We should remember we have an intense and vulnerable relation to reality, enabled to understand and experience the gap by asymmetry, creative and accountable to support the heavenly sky. The paper suggests strong indications for explaining the sometimes toxic and paradoxical relation with reality, between often distinct religious and scientific approaches and currents, based on the relation itself. Emphasizes the relation or theory symmetry or asymmetry. The paper intends to reveal another point of view in relation to reality, instead of running by disciplines in more or less distinct directions and discussing and balancing these currents. Do you have questions beyond daily life, do you search, contemplate for some coherence in life and reality, struggling for harmony and avoiding change, then the article might be interesting.

## 1. Identifying with Atlas?

Mankind often identifies with Atlas to a significant extent, particularly in the symbolic expression of Atlas in terms of burden, endurance and the weight of responsibility. Atlas, condemned to bear heaven, symbolizes the human experience of carrying heavy burdens.

Who won't recognize the burden of daily responsibilities? The manifold tasks we have to exercise, varying from the job to relations and partners and siblings. Working and caring are core characteristics of humans.

Many of us identify with Atlas because they feel the weight of various responsibilities in their personal and professional lives, such as supporting their families, managing work pressures, or enduring emotional challenges.

Just as Atlas is forced to bear the weight of the sky, people often feel the burden of their circumstances as something heavy and inescapable.

Responsibility is a part of our identity, and social and cultural prescribed.

For example, Christianity dominates western culture significantly. There is a parallel between Greek mythology and Christian literature. In Christianity, the concept of bearing a burden is of great importance, with Christ carrying the cross being a central image. Atlas, eternally bearing the weight of the heavens, can be seen as a symbol of suffering and the human condition under the weight of sin or life's trials. This parallels the Christian idea of carrying one's cross, representing life's burdens or challenges.

In Christian art and literature, figures bearing heavy loads, like Atlas, have been used as symbols of the human struggle or the weight of sin. While Atlas is not a Christian figure, the imagery of him carrying the world (or heavens) can be interpreted in a way that resonates with Christian themes of redemption, endurance, and the spiritual weight of human existence.

This burden is not easily to bear. We try to build routines and repetitive conditions to make things work so we are able to bridge physical and emotional hard times. Traditions emphasize rituals and symbols and that is in relation to this condition significant to endure the problems of labor and care. Moreover, religions tell us we are punished for original sin. Atlas punishment is eternal, much like how people often feel trapped in long-term struggles or repetitive tasks with no immediate relief. This makes Atlas a relatable figure for anyone facing prolonged hardship, whether physical, emotional, or psychological.

## Existential stress

This idea of being punished and, for better or worse, facing fate is an existential struggle. One of the main issues of religions is to reflect upon the human condition which often is characterized by suffering. Atlas represents an existential struggle that humans often face. Atlas symbolizes human need to continue despite problems, without the possibility of a resolution.

Atlas' punishment is a result of his rebellion during the Titanomachy, a war between gods, symbolizing defiance against authority or fate. In this way, mankind identifies with Atlas. Instead of accepting his condition and fate, he continues to resist against it. This gives man, too, a revolutionary character. This seems to be from existential origin. He seeks to endure, to persevere. All kind of movies are about this central theme, resisting and conquer fate of vulcan eruption, meteor impact, war. This resistance seems to be almost unnatural, because to persevere, we exclude every possibility of harm and suffering. But there it is, this means the burden of the sky or, in modern talk, holding the earth physical, social and political together. So it seems the figure symbolizes punishment on the one hand and heroism and sacrifice on the other hand, together, dependent on which point of view man chooses.

And that brings us to another aspect of the symbol of Atlas, the individual burden. Atlas bears the burden on his own, standing alone, holding the sky. He is a metaphor for people who feel isolated in the appeal to endure their problems. We have the feeling other persons are not able to fully understand the burden and so limited in sharing the sacrifice we bring in existential and physical way. Communication seems to be limited to understand each other, especially in times of pressure.

## **2.The paradox - opting in - opting out**

The feeling of the individual burden, with limited back up, is something we are able to imagine when we look at Atlas, holding the sky alone. An important philosophical existential issue is the feeling that we fall from the world we experience. The great philosopher Kant and many other philosophers wrote about this existential problem.

If we look at the statue of Atlas, we see a titan carrying heaven or earth alone. One of the questions we might ask ourselves is what his connection to the world he carries means. Should we assume he is a part of the world (opting in), that when the connection is broken, the world falls (apart)? Or has Atlas to be excluded (opting out), and only the central issue of bearing the world plays a significant role? Where do we draw a line and define the edge of the sky and earth?

We often look at the sky as reference to spiritual and timeless heaven and earth as a physical and temporary place. Why do we make such a distinction? I think that if we look at the statue of Atlas, we consider Atlas as integral part of the image we see (opting in) or see him as a figure who stands outside the world (opting out).

### Opting in

In the first point of view, Atlas is deeply connected part of the world's structure, whose existence is significant for the world's stability. The world ends when Atlas is no longer capable of bearing heaven. This reflects a more holistic view of existence, where the bearer is not detached from the world but an essential part of reality. In an analogues way, this could be seen as metaphor to the human condition, where an individual's sense of responsibility to the world is essential to its meaningful existence. The idea could be that we, like Atlas, hold up parts of our world, and if we withdraw or disconnect from it, the world falls apart on a personal, social, mental or spiritual level.

### Opting out

From this second point of view, Atlas is a figure who stands outside the world, purely as a bearer. There is no connection with the content he holds. The central issue is the act of bearing the world. Atlas' identity and relation to the world are secondary, and he functions as a symbolic or structural necessity rather than an intrinsic part of the world's creation. His attachment and relation to the world are less than the first point of view.

I think these two approaches are fundamental in areas of life. These themes of great importance are in an analogous way found in mathematics and physical law. There is an important relation between physical energy and the way information flows. Energy might be seen as a physical power, information as social power between people. But it goes further, also in religion and the philosophy of mind are fundamental currents that indicate an important paradox we experience in life.

### **3.Modern science**

#### a.Mathematics - group theory and relation to the opting in or out of Atlas

In case of mathematics, we will look at the group theory by Noether. Noether was a mathematic who developed theory about fundamental aspects of systems and how participants relate to them.

Group theory refers to the structure of mathematical sets and the transformations that preserve certain properties of those sets. It examines how entities like particles or abstract objects relate to one another under various actions (like rotations, reflections, translations). A fundamental principle of nature is the system's inherent symmetries.

Symmetry is not only by abstract thinking a fundamental principle. We shall see that this is an axiom in physical law too.

Reason is in an abstract approach able to understand reality. If we translate this to the burden of Atlas, we might say Atlas has to hold the symmetry in the sky. As earlier stated, he has to care for stability, to hold the world together.

If the world changes in coherence, it will be more challenging to hold everything together. If the changes lead to a breach in the symmetry, there will be a process of balancing structure.

An existential problem we mentioned earlier, is that the question is if Atlas is opted in or out. If he is opted in, he is part of the symmetry, if not, he breaks symmetry.

And so there seems to be two layers of fundamental problems.

The first is that man, analogues to Atlas, bears the world and holds it symmetrical, without breaking the coherence.

The second is that man, analogues to Atlas, might be seen as a part of the world (with a symmetrical relation in the world) or apart from the world, breaking symmetry.

#### Paradox of Atlas

The paradox of Atlas encloses his dual role as both bearer of the world and an external figure who is, at the same time, integral to the world's continued existence. The paradox occurs when we try to understand whether Atlas is inside or outside the system. This can be seen as an existential or logical dilemma related to self-reference and participation in the system. I mention



here system, because we will discuss later the relation of the paradox to physical law, and especially the conservation of energy in a system (law of thermodynamics).

### Opting In

If Atlas is considered part of the world, then his relationship to the world is, as we earlier mentioned, one of participation and contribution. He bears the world because he is an inherent part of it, and his opting into the system ensures the world's continued stability. This creates a kind of inclusion in terms of symmetry. A holistic approach.

### Opting Out

If Atlas is considered outside the world, he is focused on his condemnation to bear the sky. Opting out indicates asymmetry, as Atlas maintains the system's stability but is not himself governed by its rules or included in the system. The paradox arises when we ask whether the world can exist without Atlas and if he can bear the world while being outside of it. He is more a spectator, a needle for asymmetric relations, because he himself is a breaking personality.

The group theory is a strong example of the conceptual relation with reality. If mathematical approach is a conceptual approach of reality, physical science is a way to test the concept. So let us take a look at a fundamental scientific law to evaluate. Therefore we will discuss the law of thermodynamics.

### b. Physical law - scientific point of view

In this section we will discuss symmetry and asymmetry in relation to the law of thermodynamics.

The laws of thermodynamics are connected to concepts of symmetry and asymmetry in both physical and statistical contexts.

The first law states that energy is conserved in an isolated system: energy can neither be created nor destroyed, only transformed from one form to another. This conservation law is a result of time translation symmetry. This is the idea that the laws of physics and the behavior of a system do not change if we shift the time of observation. This invariance leads to the conservation of energy, as stated by Noether's theorem. In thermodynamics, this means the total energy in a system remains the same over time, even as it changes forms.

This symmetric feature highlights that energy behaves the same regardless of when processes happen, reflecting a fundamental symmetry in physical laws.

And if we judge the system as holistic, referring to the variant opting in, there is a relation with the first law of conservation of energy.

On the other hand, the second law, also known as entropy, states that the total entropy of an isolated system tends to increase over time, which introduces a fundamental time asymmetry. This introduces an arrow or direction to time because entropy, or the measure of disorder, increases in irreversible processes. While the underlying microscopic physical laws (like Newton's laws or quantum mechanics) are time-symmetric, meaning they can run forwards or backwards without changing the outcome, the second law imposes a direction in macroscopic systems.

This process is irreversible. Processes such as heat flow from a hot object to a cold one are inherently asymmetric in time. Once energy is used as heat, it cannot naturally flow back into a more ordered, usable form without external work. This asymmetry in thermodynamic processes is a fundament of the second law. Asymmetry is seen as breaking symmetry. In thermodynamic systems, spontaneous symmetry breaking often occurs, especially during phase transitions (from liquid to solid, for example). This symmetry breaking can be described in terms of group theory. For instance, a system might start with a high degree of symmetry (such as a liquid, which is isotropic), and as it cools and solidifies, the symmetry is broken (the crystalline structure breaks the isotropy).

Energy empowers or provides power to change and flow. This is a physical reality. Physical science has proven this reality is connected to the realm of information. This is interesting, because information is seen as a fundamental part of physical law.

Before we discuss information as topic, we might ask the question what is the reason our thinking patterns and understanding are able to analyze and categorize universe in these two distinct but also related laws. Is it not inevitable that man is able to understand because of a connection of our mind with reality?

### c.Information

What is the relation of information with Atlas? Information and so knowledge can be seen as part of the flow of energy, interacting with symmetry and

asymmetry in physical laws, particularly within the framework of modern physics.

In physics, energy and information are deeply connected. Information can be thought of as a way of describing the state of a system, while energy governs how systems evolve over time. In thermodynamics, for example, entropy (a measure of disorder or information) is closely linked to the flow of energy. The second law of thermodynamics states that systems evolve toward higher entropy, representing the flow of energy in a way that increases the uncertainty or disorder of the system, a direct link between information and energy.

If information desintegrates, it breaks the symmetry because the uncertainty or disorder increases. A possible explanation why humans are always eager to gather and order information, is the fundamental paradox of symmetry and asymmetry. Information is a key to power to hold the sky, to preserve it from falling apart.

But when we are empowered by knowledge, we understand more about the universe, and are able to be seduced to take the fire of information with us, for a moment, with imbalance as result. Accountability creates a relation of support but also surrender. Support enhances the relation, surrender enhances a feeling of loss, shame and failure. Human being is not able to hold the sky (forever). So ultimately he has to emphasize the relationship with God, creator of the sky and ceiling, and ask him for support and forgiveness.

#### **4.A religious myth**

The myth of Atlas has similarities with the myth of Lucifer.

The myth of Lucifer refers to Lucifer's pride, rebellion and fall from grace in the Christian tradition.

Lucifer, also known as the light-bearer, was originally one of God's most beautiful and powerful angels. However, Lucifer became prideful and desired to take God's place, so he became rebellious against God.

In Isaiah, which speaks of the morning star (often interpreted as Lucifer) saying that he will ascend to the heavens, raise his throne above the stars of God.

As a result of his pride and rebellion, Lucifer was cast out of heaven and fell to earth, becoming Satan.

In terms of pride, rebellion and the punishment by God, there are clear analogies between Atlas and Lucifer.

From this point of view, we get a message, and that is that we should not conquer the throne of supreme power. The punishment of Atlas and Lucifer makes clear we will be thrown out of a symmetrical relation in a holistic view and break with it in an asymmetrical way. Pride which results in the idea to rule the sky, leads definitely to breaking up relations with powers beyond human understanding.

It is not only reality we experience in symmetrical and asymmetrical ways, but also a reality we interact with. In this relation we are often focused upon the choice we have in communication and action. But apparently the paradox is also emphasized by a mental condition and that is that we are focused on influencing the sky. (Economic and original) choice is a part of the issue that shapes the context we create in the relation with reality. In our drive to hold up the symmetry of the sky, we are seduced to rule it all and create the harmony of the skies.

Our thoughts and so the mind take an important piece of the cake in the way we interact in reality. It is interesting to discuss the relation from the point of view of philosophical currents.

## 5.Philosophy of mind

In the philosophy of mind, the relation between man as a subject and reality is discussed in the distinction between subject and object. This refers directly to the concepts of symmetry and asymmetry. We will zoom in upon several philosophical currents to discuss the results of starting points in the subject-object relation in terms of symmetry and asymmetry. This starting point is the classical subject-object relation. This is a strong indication for the question if we approach reality symmetric or asymmetric.

The subject (the individual) is conscious, self-aware, and capable of reflective thought, whereas the object (reality) exists independently of the subject's consciousness. This creates an asymmetry because the subject's experience of reality is mediated through perception, while reality itself is external and indifferent in relation to the subject. The thinking subject is the starting point. In western philosophy, the philosopher Descartes more or less introduced this when he stated 'cogito ergo sum'.

In Descartes' philosophy the individual as a thinking subject (cogito) has an inherently different status than the external world of objects, creating an asymmetrical relation. The point of reflection changed from the question if the support to hold the sky was enough (which made it possible to surpass to heaven) or pride and wrong choices might lock the relation with heaven, to a thinking subject in a dynamic landscape we call reality.

Kant expanded on this idea by suggesting that human cognition shapes how reality is perceived. While reality (the noumenon, thing on itself) exists independently, humans can only experience the phenomenon, the reality as it appears to the mind. This means that human perception imposes structures (space, time, causality) onto reality, making the relationship fundamentally asymmetrical because reality is filtered through our cognitive faculties. This means a shift from the symmetrical support to asymmetrical relation and emphasize of the individual and asymmetrical condition of an isolated individual. Kant was never able to bridge the gap and we might say that knowledge is embedded in reason, but setting reason on it own indicates a tensed interaction with the symmetrical sky and tends to an opting out, more or less breaking with religious intervention of supreme powers that were dominant theological thoughts in the middle ages.

In rationalism, phenomenology (Husserl, Heidegger) and existentialism (Sartre), the relationship between man and reality continues to be largely asymmetrical. The individual's experience of the world is shaped by intentionality (phenomenology) or freedom to create meaning

(existentialism). The subjective lens through which we engage with reality emphasizes the asymmetry: reality exists for the subject in ways that are unique for each observer's experience or choice. It is not the (mythical or religious) relation and the support and meaning of the subject, but more the (rationalistic, phenomenal, existential) condition of a conscious human being struggling with and understanding the meaning of the objective world to man on itself. He is to a certain degree more observer or spectator than supportive steward.

The relationship between man as a spectator and reality is predominantly asymmetrical. While certain philosophical frameworks (such as idealism), propose a more symmetrical view, most Western philosophical traditions emphasize the asymmetry of this relationship due to the limitations of human perception, knowledge, and the distinction between self and world.

## 6.Overview of disciplines and currents

	Symmetry	Asymmetry
Mathematics (group theory)	group theory	arrow of time
Physical law (laws of thermodynamics)	conservation of energy	entropy
Information (choice)	opting in	opting out
Religious and philosophical currents	emphasized by religion	philosophical currents

## 7. Personal considerations

Every individual has paradoxical experiences and thoughts that are related to opting in and opting out, symmetry and asymmetry. We have the possibility to reflect upon this, because we have self-awareness. Furthermore we have an intrinsic guidance system, conscience, by which we are able to deeply connect with metaphysical reality and inherent supportive memory. We find these philosophical truths in universe too, in mathematics and physical science. We are able not only to be aware of the contribution by holding symmetry in the world and in memory of heaven, but also envision the path to heaven and, so to speak with Plato, see the sun of being and goodness rising. And we are no longer abducted by things, but by wisdom, no longer by the transaction of condemnation to hold the sky, but transcendence of participation and contribution of the symmetrical heaven. Economic and original choice is an iterative echo or preview of exclusion respectively inclusion. Emphasizing this inherent paradox of the barber of Sevilla.

Maybe we should less emphasize the need to choose, but transform and redefine our relation with reality (again), more on connection than things on itself.

But as long as we are in a state of transaction, with focus on physical, social, mental and spiritual questions that intensify the paradox, which seems to be the normal human condition, we choose, even if we let fate decide, without knowing or remembering the intense relation human being could have with reality. Pride blinds human being, thinking symmetry should centre around him, driven by ignorance to an even more asymmetric relation with reality, forcing more and more the question of the relation.

On the other hand, to approach the human condition as inclusive to the balancing process, human being is in a process of asymmetric reality. A result of asymmetry is the vision of the gap, the possibility to create balance, the question how to solve instability, an almost or maybe precious hint of supreme power reaching for our hand, which we are able to shake by diving into this deep and infinite mystery.

E. Heemskerk, October 19, 2024