TOM BUTLER-BOWDON

50 PHILOSOPHY CLASSICS

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Your shortcut to the most important ideas on being, truth and meaning

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Introduction

"Philosophy is at once the most sublime and the most trivial of human pursuits. It works in the minutest crannies and it opens out the widest vistas. It 'bakes no bread,' as has been said, but it can inspire our souls with courage; and repugnant as its manners, its doubting and challenging, its quibbling and dialectics, often are to common people, no one of us can get along without the far-flashing beams of light it sends over the world's perspectives."
William James, Pragmatism

The word philosophy comes from the Greek *philo* (love) and *sophia* (wisdom). Both as a discipline and as a personal outlook, philosophy is about the desire to think, exist, act, and see in better ways – to get at the truth of things.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines philosophy as "the use of reason and argument in seeking truth and knowledge of reality, especially of the causes and nature of things and of the principles governing existence, the material universe, perception of physical phenomena and human behaviour." In other words, philosophy is high-level thinking to establish what is true or real, given the limits of human thought and senses, and the implications of this for how we act.

While philosophy has multiple strands, its focus on what we can really know is perhaps its most salient feature. The discipline's constant questioning of assumptions has annoyed many, even its own practitioners – "Philosophers have raised a dust and then complain they cannot see," George Berkeley said – yet in our age, with its seemingly increasing extremes and uncertainty, philosophy's focus on what can be known comes into its own. Indeed, as Nassim Nicholas Taleb points out in *The Black Swan*, it is what we do not know that matters, because it is always the unforeseen that changes our world, both personal and public.

Perhaps the greatest divide in philosophy is between those who believe that all our information must come from the senses

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(the empirical, materialist view) and those who believe that truth can be arrived at through abstract reasoning (the rationalists and idealists). The first camp has a long lineage, from the second-century skeptic Sextus Empiricus to the Englishman Francis Bacon and Scottish Enlightenment thinker David Hume, and to the twentieth-century "logical positivists," including A.J. Ayer and philosopher of science Karl Popper. The second camp counts among its number Plato (his theory of nonphysical "Forms" that undergird the universe), Descartes (his famous separation of mind and matter), and Kant (who resurrected the idea of "moral law" in modern philosophy). The purpose of this book is not to tell you who is "right," but to lay out some of the ideas and theories of note to help you make up your own mind.

As William James observed in *Pragmatism*, philosophers like to believe that they are erecting impartial and accurate systems to explain human action and the universe, when in fact philosophies are expressions of personal biases and outlooks. Philosophy is made by philosophers – imperfect people offering their version of the truth. Yet this is what makes it interesting, and this book, as well as describing some of the key philosophical theories, also tries to give a sense of the people who devised them. To what extent was their thinking simply a projection of their own minds, or did they get to the heart of something universal?

Since I have already written books on the classic writings in psychology, spirituality, and personal development, the most valid question for me was what philosophy provides that these fields do not. After all, because it has an experimental methodology, many believe that psychology is a more trustworthy discipline when it comes to human questions. However, as Wittgenstein noted in *Philosophical Investigations*, scientific method can sometimes hide a lack of conceptual depth. What is reality? What does it mean to be a human? What is the meaning of life? Philosophy is the only real "meta" discipline, Nietzsche claimed, made to consider the totality of things. While it might be said that theology and spirituality are designed for such questions, they lack the neutrality that is needed for a real discipline open to all-comers.

This is not to say that philosophy is "scientific." Bertrand

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Russell noted that it is the business of science to know more facts, while the work of philosophy is to establish valid conceptions and laws through which science can be seen. Rather than science enveloping philosophy (a belief of the physicist Stephen Hawking), it is philosophy that can help put raw data and scientific theories into a larger context. Science is after all a very human project, and if it is the attempt to make our theories fit nature, then it is *human* nature with which we first have to contend. To know what we are looking at, we must be aware of the lens through which we view it; that is, how we see the world. We know, for instance, that the old Newtonian perspective on the universe, with its focus on matter, no longer copes with the strange, fluid reality that quantum physics suggests. Philosophy is well equipped to look at these uncertainties because of its focus on objectivity and consciousness itself. The twentieth-century particle physicist David Bohm had to turn to philosophy to explain the movement of electrons under his microscope. It was not possible to construe the world in terms of mind looking at matter, he concluded; rather, consciousness is at least as important an element in the working of the universe as is matter itself. In this book I look at these and other fascinating matters in more depth.

In addition to the primary meaning given above, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines philosophy as "a personal rule of life."

We all have such a philosophy and it shapes everything we do. Our larger outlook on the world is usually the most interesting and important thing about us, expressing "our more or less dumb sense of what life honestly and deeply means," as William James wrote in *Pragmatism*. Far from being the preserve of lofty professors, our philosophy is practical; we could barely operate without one. As G.K. Chesterton wrote:

> *"for a landlady considering a lodger, it is important to know his income, but still more important to know his philosophy … for a general about to fight an enemy, it is important to know the enemy's numbers, but still more important to know the enemy's philosophy … the question is not whether the theory of the cosmos affects matters, but whether, in the long run, anything else affects them."*

There is, of course, a difference between a personal philosophy

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and philosophy as a discipline. This book seeks to bridge the two. It is not about what a particular philosophy says or means in isolation, but what it may mean to me or you – whether it can increase the quality of our lives, guide our actions in the world, or shed light on our place in the universe.

Whether it is Aristotle or Epicurus providing recipes for a fulfilled and happy life or Plato outlining the ideal society, the ideas of these ancient thinkers remain powerful, if only because in over 2,000 years humans have not changed much. Philosophy is resurgent because the big questions never go away, and it provides ready-made concepts for addressing them. The brilliance of philosophy is that despite its lack of objectivity, it still has the power to send "far-flashing beams of light" over the world, allowing us to see things anew.

Not only does philosophy give us a framework for seeing all other knowledge, on a more personal and exciting level it offers us fresh and often liberating ways of thinking, being, acting, and being.

THINKING

The limits of our knowledge, the sense of self

Philosophy is first about how to think and, given the human propensity to get things wrong, this often means questioning the bases of our knowledge. Descartes went to some lengths to show how easily the mind could be misled by data from the senses, and from this wondered how anything could be said truly to exist. Yet from this position of extreme doubt he made his breakthrough: surely, if he had the ability to be deceived in his thinking, there had to be an "I" that was experiencing the deception. He wrote:

> *"I thereby concluded that I was a substance, of which the whole essence or nature consists in thinking, and which, in order to exist, needs no place and depends on no material thing."*

Even if we are constantly deceived about what we perceive to be fact, it cannot be doubted that we perceive. We are, first and foremost, "thinking things." Consciousness is our essence, and what we are conscious of the most is ourselves: what we are

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thinking, how we are doing, what we will do next, what we know. As Descartes put it, “I am thinking, therefore I am.”

David Hume and John Locke believed that the only knowledge we could trust was that derived directly from our senses, and Hume took this a step further by suggesting that human beings are simply a bundle of thoughts, impressions, and feelings, which at any one time provide a sense of being an “I,” even if that identity lacks a solid core. Far from possessing an immortal soul, we are more like a constantly moving banquet of experiences and perceptions, and therefore certainty and knowledge remain elusive. Contemporary philosopher Julian Baggini supports Hume’s bundle theory, drawing on neuroscience to show that our sense of self cannot be located in any particular part of the brain or nervous system. Rather, many parts work together to create the feeling of an autonomous, free-willing self. This may be a grand “ego trick” or an illusion, but it makes life manageable.

Philosophy is associated with the quest for self-knowledge, but Iris Murdoch is another who has questioned the idea that there is some eternal core to us that we must be on a mission to reveal. She writes in *The Sovereignty of Good*:

> *“‘Self-knowledge’, in the sense of a minute understanding of one’s own machinery, seems to me, except at a fairly simple level, usually a delusion … Self is as hard to see justly as other things, and when clear vision has been achieved, self is a correspondingly smaller and less interesting object.”*

On the other hand, Murdoch says, this lack of self-solidity should not stop us making efforts to improve ourselves. It is natural and right for us to strive to be perfect, even if we are beset by deficiencies of perception and lack of courage.

In his *Essays*, Michel de Montaigne provided a forensic examination of the self using his own prejudices and weaknesses as the subject matter, and came to the conclusion that the self is a mystery: human knowledge is limited to such an extent that we barely know anything about ourselves, let alone the world at large. We are continually thinking, but rather than the rational beings we suppose ourselves to be, we are a mass of prejudices, quirks, and vanities.

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Human fallibility is a rich vein to tap, and some recent writings give special insights into this area. Daniel Kahneman won a Nobel Prize for his work into the biases and mistakes we make in everyday thinking. In *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, he argues that we are a "machine for jumping to conclusions," wired more to keep alive and respond to threats than to perceive accurately. Nassim Nicholas Taleb also takes up this theme, noting that we believe we understand more of what's going on in the world than we actually do; we often wrongly ascribe meaning to events after they've happened, creating a story; and we overvalue facts, statistics, and categories, which make us feel comfortable that we can predict the future. Our shock at unexpected events shows just how illusory is this feeling that we are in control. And yet, we wouldn't attempt half the things we do if we had a more accurate picture of what we can achieve in a certain timeframe. Seen this way, error is not a defect of the human condition, but part of its eventual glory. Indeed, as Kahneman notes, the focus on human errors "does not denigrate human intelligence, any more than the attention to diseases in medical texts denies good health. Most of us are healthy most of the time, and most of our judgements and actions are appropriate most of the time."

On that same positive note, even arch-empiricist Karl Popper (*The Logic of Scientific Discovery*), who also mistrusted the senses and proposed an extremely difficult standard for the acceptance of any scientific truth, argued that it is humankind's role and privilege to theorize about the laws that may govern the universe. We may be physiologically set up to get things wrong much of the time, but nevertheless our ability to think in a vaguely logical way – to use an older term, reason – makes us unique in the animal world.

BEING

Chances for happiness and a meaningful life, free will, and autonomy

Philosophers since ancient times have suggested that happiness results from moving away from the self, either throwing ourselves into causes or work important to us, or loosening the bands of the ego through appreciating nature, through love, or

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via spiritual practice.

For Epicurus, virtue made for a pleasant and happy life, because doing the right thing naturally puts our mind at rest. Instead of being anguished about the consequences of our bad actions, we are liberated to enjoy a simple life of friends, philosophy, nature, and small comforts.

Aristotle believed that happiness comes from expressing what we have rationally decided is good for us over the longer term, such as service to the community. Everything in nature is built with an end or purpose in mind, and what is unique to humans is the ability to act according to our reason and preselected virtues. A happy person is one who is stable through their cultivation of virtue, who makes the vagaries of fortune irrelevant. “Activities in accord with virtue control happiness,” Aristotle said. Happiness is therefore not pleasure, but a by-product of a meaningful life, and meaning tends to come from striving and self-discipline.

Bertrand Russell noted almost the same in his very personal *The Conquest of Happiness*. Effort, even more than actual success, he wrote, is an essential ingredient of happiness; a person who is able to gratify all whims without effort feels that attainment of desires does not make for happiness. A focus on the self is a cause of unhappiness, while joy comes from directing our interests outward, throwing ourselves into life.

Leibniz was parodied by Voltaire for suggesting that the world we live in is “the best of all possible worlds,” but his real point was more subtle. The best possible world is not the one specifically designed for human happiness. Human beings are driven by self-interest and are not aware of the good result of everything that happens. We see matters in terms of cause and effect, but our appreciation of the relationship between them is naturally limited. Only a supreme being has the overview of how everything knits together, Leibniz argued, and our role is to trust in this benevolence of intention. The world we live in is the best possible world, he famously said, even if it appears to contain a great deal of evil, because “an imperfection in the part may be required for a greater perfection in the whole.”

But what if you believe, as the existentialists did, that the universe has no purpose or meaning? Sartre’s answer was to

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live "authentically," choosing your own destiny instead of blindly accepting society's rules or the moral "laws" of the day. He wrote: "Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does." From such an unpromising premise, Sartre developed a philosophy of freedom that did not depend on any God, attracting a whole generation keen to live in their own way.

This outlook assumes that we are autonomous beings with free will – but are we? Spinoza, Schopenhauer, and Montaigne, among others, argued that we are the subject of causes and larger forces of which we can be only dimly aware. Sam Harris's *Free Will* informs us of research suggesting that free will is an illusion: our actions are the product of brain states, which are themselves the result of prior causes, which in turn are generated by a universe over which we have zero control. We only feel like we have free will because our brains are set up to give this happy illusion. Where does this leave us? Harris's crucial point is that, wherever they come from, we still have conscious intentions, and life is about trying to have these fulfilled. On a purely rational or scientific level, this is the "meaning" of life.

Heidegger argued that it is impossible for us not to find our existence meaningful. I love, I act, I have an impact – this is the nature of my being. Beyond this, there is the astonishing fact of having consciousness. Why do I have it to this advanced level, when a sheep or a rock does not? A human being is "thrown" into the world, Heidegger said, into a particular place, time, and situation not of their choosing, and life is about making sense of this "fall" into space and time. We feel some responsibility to do something with our lives, and fortunately we come equipped with the capacities for speech and action, which give us the opportunity to reveal something of ourselves. A good life is one in which we seize what possibilities we have and make something out of them. Given our rich raw materials of consciousness and environment, life is inherently meaningful.

Hannah Arendt noted that while nature may be an inexorable process of living and dying, humanity was given a way out of this through the ability to act. "Men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin," she wrote in *The*

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Human Condition. Other animals can only behave according to their programmed survival instincts and impulses, but human beings can go beyond our selfish biological needs to bring something new into being whose value may be recognized in a social and public way. Our deeds are never quite predictable, and every birth carries with it the possibility of a changed world. In short, we *matter*.

ACTING

Power and its use, liberty and justice, fairness and ethics

> *"Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."*

Immanuel Kant's "categorical imperative" says that individual actions are to be judged according to whether we would be pleased if everyone in society took the same action. People should never be seen as means to an end. Although this principle is espoused by the world's religions, Kant was determined to show that it made rational and philosophical sense as well. Moral law was as unchanging as the stars at night, he believed, and by going against it we are destined to be frustrated and unhappy. By doing what is right, we create for ourselves a world of order and peace.

The Roman orator Cicero believed that every individual is a spark or splinter of God, and so treating another human being badly is like doing the same to ourselves. To him, this is a simple fact of universal law. We are social animals, born for the sake of each other, and the aim of life is simple: "to contribute to the general good by an interchange of acts of kindness, by giving and receiving, and thus by our skill, our industry, and our talents to cement human society more closely together, man to man." Cicero aimed to explode the idea that you must sometimes sacrifice doing "what is right" for the sake of doing what is expedient. Doing what is right, he wrote in *On Duties*, is always what is expedient.

Plato believed that doing the right thing is its own reward, since it brings the three parts of our soul (reason, spirit, and desire) into harmony. Acting justly is not an optional extra, but the axis around which human existence must turn; life is meaningless if it lacks well-intentioned action. And while justice

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is an absolute necessity for the individual, it is also the central plank of a good state, which he outlines in *The Republic*.

A few centuries earlier in China, Confucius said much the same, noting that although we are born human, we become a person through fulfilling responsible roles in society in a selfless way. The wise person loves virtue more than anything, and will always seek the best outcome for everyone without self-calculation. We are, after all, just one link in a chain of being that stretches into the past and future.

In *The Life You Can Save*, contemporary philosopher Peter Singer quotes Epicurus: “It is impossible to live the pleasant life without also living sensibly, nobly and justly.” The good life is not merely good health, property, new cars, and holidays, but thinking and acting on what can be done to make the world more just. Singer’s rationale for personal giving to end world poverty is a reminder of how powerful philosophy can be for the real world.

This utilitarian outlook can be traced back to Jeremy Bentham in the eighteenth century. Bentham spent a lifetime promoting his principle of “the greatest happiness of the greatest number.” His wish was to legislate happiness into being, a radical idea because in his time Britain’s laws were more aimed to protect established interests rather than to bring about the greatest benefit for all. In this Bentham faced an uphill battle, yet he was passionate in his belief that utilitarianism was the best hope for a fair and civilized society.

In his landmark *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls asks us to imagine that everyone in a society has lost their memory about their place and status, and then to configure a new society based on giving maximum opportunity for everyone to flourish. Given that in the lottery of life we could be born a pauper as much as a king, would we not go out of our way to ensure that everyone at least had an equal opportunity to succeed? Where there is inequality of wealth or status, it should have arisen only where there has been full access to compete for such resources or prizes in the first place. No sacrifices need to be made to some “greater good” as in utilitarianism, and people will accept inequalities of wealth and status so long as they know that they or their children have an equal chance at achieving these aims themselves. Rawls’s philosophy is in the same tradition as

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Rousseau, who believed that a free society raises up and ennobles its citizens, but also entails responsibilities and a willingness to give up some personal liberty for the needs of the whole.

John Stuart Mill's timeless rationale for individual freedom, *On Liberty*, contained his famous "nonharm" criterion for ensuring freedom: "The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others." A government should not impose a law just because it is considered to be for people's "own good." Rather, unless a citizen's action is shown to be demonstrably bad for others, it should be allowed. Mill noted the tendency for government power to increase and individual freedoms to be eroded, unless this is monitored and held in check. Yet this fact, and its warning of government creep, did not mean that governments had no legitimacy at all.

What, then, is the correct balance between personal freedom and the need for state control? Mill described this as "the question of the future," and indeed we still grapple with it now. As Plato argued in *The Republic*, we should be happy to live with some restricted freedoms and accept our place in society, given the alternatives of exile or life beyond laws. The problem, as Machiavelli pointed out with brutal honesty in *The Prince*, is that the average citizen simply does not appreciate what it takes to keep a powerful state going, and can continue to live a moral life while the rulers have to take "dirty" decisions. Long seen as an inspiration for tyrants, *The Prince* in fact lays out a reasoned defense of the exertion of power: it is not for the self-aggrandizement of the ruler, but rather for the strength of the state – and a strong state is desirable because it allows people to flourish and prosper. With this just end in mind, unpleasant means can sometimes be justified.

Noam Chomsky, a perennial thorn in the side of Western liberal complacency, takes a similarly dark view of power. Most contemporary states, he believes, are set up to serve the interests of power, and the real enemy of those in power is their own population; most wars are designed to take attention away from the domestic situation. Although Chomsky's focus has been on the United States, his message is that the corrupting nature

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of power is universal. And yet, he notes causes for optimism. It is less acceptable now to treat people as objects or means to an end ("Slavery was considered a fine thing not long ago," he writes), and even if power structures only pay lip-service to freedom, self-determination, and human rights, at least these are acknowledged as ideals.

Perhaps the last word on morality and power should go to Iris Murdoch, who argues in *The Sovereignty of Good* that if we seek the good first, everything else worthwhile will come us naturally. In contrast, seek only to have muscular will, and that is all, in the end, that we will have. Just as Kant suggested, good intentions are everything.

SEEING

Plato's cave and truth, philosophy as a language problem, living in a media world

Plato's allegory of the cave is one of the most famous passages in philosophy. It continues to resonate because of its startling suggestion that most of us go through life chasing shadows and the appearance of things, when all along there exist the eternal "forms" of Truth, Justice, Beauty, and the Good, waiting to be recognized. Kant, too, believed that, as beings existing in space and time and with the limitations of our senses, we are cut off from perceiving things as they really are ("things in themselves"). Yet there is an elemental, metaphysical truth behind the world of perceptions, and through reason we can at least make some approach to it.

Modern philosophers have lined up to dismiss such notions, pointing out that we are animals with a brain that perceives and organizes phenomena in certain ways. Knowledge is based only on what comes through our senses, not on metaphysical insight, and science is a matter of increasing our objectivity. Hegel, however, argued that objective analysis is an illusion, because things only exist in the context of the observer's perception of them; consciousness is as much a part of science as the world of objects that it purports to analyze. For Hegel, the real story of science is not the "discovery of the universe," but rather the discovery of our own mind – consciousness itself. History, science, and philosophy are simply expressions of how

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consciousness has awakened over time.

Hegel's grand, holistic idea of awakening "Spirit" or consciousness in human affairs fell out of philosophical fashion because world wars and depressions seemed to counter the notion that history had a positive direction. Indeed, as philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn showed in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and as Michel Foucault also noted, knowledge does not proceed in a neat line upward, with one discovery building on another; rather, each age has a completely different lens through which it views the world, and something is perceived to be real only if the lens allows it to be seen.

Whoever is right here, any assessment of our ability to comprehend the world accurately must involve language. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein admitted that he had been wrong in the view expressed in his earlier *Tractatus* that language is a means of describing the world. Words do not simply name things, they often convey elaborate meaning, and many different meanings from the same word. Language is not a formal logic that marks the limits of our world, but a social game in which the order of play is loose and evolves as we go along. Philosophical problems only arise, he said, when philosophers see the naming of some idea or concept as all-important, while in fact contextual meaning is what matters. Philosophy, Wittgenstein famously said, is a constant battle against the "bewitchment" of the discipline by language itself. This was a dig at the analytical tradition of philosophy (whose adherents included Bertrand Russell and A.J. Ayer), which saw the misuse of language as a welcome mat for so much meaningless metaphysics, whereas its good use could give us a more accurate picture of reality.

In *Naming and Necessity*, the brilliant Saul Kripke showed the faults of this conception, noting that the meaning of something is found not in the descriptions given of it, but in its essential properties. A person, for instance, is simply who they are, and no amount of language accuracy is going to add, take away, or prove that identity. Gold is not defined by our descriptions of it, such as "yellow, shiny metal," but rather by its essential property, the atomic element 79.

From Plato to Kant, Hegel to Wittgenstein, an idea recurs

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through the history of philosophy: the world is not simply how we perceive or describe it. Whether we use the term forms, things-in-themselves, or essential properties, there is an underlying reality that may not be obvious to the senses. David Bohm was a leading theoretical physicist turned philosopher, and in *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* he made a compelling case for the existence of two orders of reality: the implicate and the explicate. While the latter is the “real world” that we can perceive with our senses, it is simply the unfolding of a deeper, “implicate” reality that holds every possibility. Both are part of a larger “holomovement,” a flowing whole of reality. This is very similar to the wholeness of the universe of which Heraclitus spoke. It is only humans who break things into parts and categories.

***

Philosophy’s historical obsession with the questions “What is real?” and “What is true?” is seen by some commentators as a red herring. Jean Baudrillard declared that, in the media-saturated world we now inhabit, “reality” has no meaning. In a hyperreal universe, something is real only if it can be reproduced endlessly, and what is unshareable electronically does not exist. A person today is not a project in selfhood, pursuing what is “true,” but more like a machine that consumes and reproduces ideas and images.

Baudrillard was influenced by Marshall McLuhan, who argued that the mass media and communications technology were not neutral inventions but in fact change the way we are. Before the advent of the alphabet, humankind’s main sensory organ was the ear. After it, the eye became dominant. The alphabet made us think like a sentence is constructed: in a linear way, and with the sequential connection of facts or concepts. The new media environment is multidimensional, and media information now comes to us so thick and fast that we no longer have the ability to categorize it properly and deal with it in our minds. Children growing up today do not only have their parents and teachers to influence them, they are exposed to the whole world. As McLuhan famously said:

> *“Ours is a brand new world of allatonceness. ‘Time’ has ceased, ‘space’ has vanished. We now live in a global village*

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… a simultaneous happening.”

In this new media world, is Plato’s cave allegory still meaningful? Have we lost all chance to perceive the real and true, and does it matter? Such questions will take philosophy into the future, but one thing is for sure: we cannot continue to see ourselves as separate from technology. As the new “transhumanist” thinkers suggest, we are no longer in a world in which people simply use technology; machines are part of us, and will become ever more extensions of our bodies – through them we will perceive ourselves and the world.

Final word

Hegel took an unusually expansive and generous view of philosophy. As he notes in the famous Preface to *Phenomenology of Spirit*, conventional philosophers see their subject as a field of competing positions in which only one system can be said to “win.” They take the perspective of a battlefield of ideologies. Hegel instead adopted a bird’s-eye view of the discipline: each competing philosophy had its place, and over time their jostling allowed for “the progressive unfolding of truth.” Putting this in botanical terms, he wrote that the buds are forgotten when they burst forth into blossom, and the blossom in turn gives way to fruit, which reveals the truth or purpose of the tree. Hegel’s aim was to free philosophy from its one-sidedness and to show the truth of the whole. It was better to see the variety and richness of culture and philosophy as one great project.

Theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas wrote in *On the Heavens*:

> *“the study of philosophy has as its purpose to know not what people have thought, but rather the truth about the way things are.”*

That is our goal, but knowing what people have thought can still help us. If you don’t have a firm view of life, in these pages you will find plenty of powerful concepts through which to view it, or, better still, to challenge your existing worldview. It is natural for us to want certainty, but if there exists any kind of absolute knowledge, it will not be altered or moved by our questioning.

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Therefore, you have nothing to lose by studying the great works of philosophy, and everything to gain.

What is in the book and why

The list of 50 titles does not claim to be definitive, only to give a sense of some of the key writings in Western philosophy, ancient and modern, with a hint of the East as well. While I would love to have included philosophers from every part of the world and every era, this book is at least a taste of what is a vast literature. At the rear of the book you will find a list of 50 More Classics, most of which could have been in the main text if there had been no space limit.

The focus is less on the usual categorization of philosophical schools, periods, "ologies," and "isms" that is the norm in introductory or academic texts. This is a layperson's guide to philosophy. You are not being trained in anything, only – it is hoped – enlightened. Having said that, like any field philosophy has its own terms and language, so there is also a glossary of common terms to help you at the end of the book.

Philosophy as a formal section of academia has had a relatively short history. Epicurus started his school in the garden of a house in Athens, and today there are philosophy clubs around the world that meet in pubs and homes. Philosophy is a living thing, and its questions will continue to be at the center of human existence. To that end, along with many of the undisputedly great names of philosophy, the list of 50 includes some contemporary works that, although not true classics as yet perhaps, give real insights.

In terms of structure, the alphabetical, nonchronological ordering may seem counterintuitive, and yet by putting books together like this there is less chance of categories being forced on you, and you can make your own connections between ideas, writings, eras, and people. You can pick out and read the commentaries that look most interesting, but you may also find that reading the book from start to finish will give you more of a sense of a journey, and

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you may make unexpected discoveries along the way.

Bonus

Please write to me at tombutlerbowdon@gmail.com with "Philosophy" in the title bar and I'll be very pleased to email you a set of free extra philosophy commentaries. Look forward to hearing from you. **TBB**

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(1958)
The Human Condition

"With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance. This insertion … springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative."

"The task and potential greatness of mortals lie in their ability to produce things – works and deeds and words – which would deserve to be and, at least to a degree, are at home in everlastingness."

In a nutshell

The nature of being human is to do the unexpected, and every birth carries with it the possibility of a changed world.

In a similar vein

Henri Bergson *Creative Evolution* (p 56)
Martin Heidegger *Being and Time* (p 126)

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CHAPTER 1
Hannah Arendt

German-born Hannah Arendt was one of America's leading twentieth-century intellectuals, rising to prominence with her study of Hitler and Stalin, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), then achieving fame with *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1962), a study of the trial of Nazi Adolf Eichmann that included her concept of "the banality of evil."

The Human Condition is the best expression of her larger philosophy. Though it is scholarly (she was an expert in classical Rome and Greece) and often difficult, it is genuinely original. And while it can be studied as a work of political philosophy, it also provides a very inspiring theory of human potential.

The miracle of birth and action

Nature is essentially cyclical, Arendt says, a never-ending and inexorable process of living and dying that "only spells doom" to mortal beings. However, humans were given a way out of this through the ability to *act*. Free action interferes with the law of inexorable death by beginning something new. "Men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin."

This is Arendt's concept of "natality," inspired by St. Augustine's famous statement, "That a beginning was made, man was created." Arendt writes:

> *"It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before … The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle. The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world."*

Being born is a miracle in itself, but the real glory is in the way we confirm our identity through our words and deeds. While animals can only behave according to their programmed survival

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instincts and impulses, human beings can *act*, going beyond our selfish biological needs to bring something new into being whose value may be recognized in a social and public way. (Like Socrates drinking hemlock by his choice, or someone who gives their life for another, we can even act against our very survival instinct.) And because of this ability to make truly free decisions, our deeds are never quite predictable. Action, Arendt says, "seen from the viewpoint of the automatic processes which seem to determine the course of the world, looks like a miracle." Our lives are about "the infinite improbability which occurs regularly." In her other writings she suggests that the essence of fascist regimes is in their denial of this natality, or individual possibility, and this is what makes them so abhorrent.

Forgiveness and promise keeping

Arendt recalls Jesus of Nazareth's emphasis on action, particularly the act of forgiving, as an important point in history, since this discovery allowed us, not only God, the power to nullify past actions. This power Jesus put almost on the level of physical miracles, given its ability to transform worldly situations. Arendt writes:

> *"Only through this constant mutual release from what they do can men remain free agents, only by constant willingness to change their minds and start again can they be trusted with so great a power as that to begin something new."*

Whereas the wish for vengeance is automatic and thus a predictable action, the act of forgiving, because it seems to go against natural reactions, can never be predicted. Forgiveness has the character of real, thought-out action, and in this respect is more human than the animalistic reaction of revenge, because it frees both the forgiver and the forgiven. Action of this type is the only thing that prevents human lives from hurtling from birth to death without real meaning.

Arendt agrees with Nietzsche that what also marks out humans from other animals is the ability to make promises and keep them. Our basic unreliability is the price we pay for our freedom, but we have devised ways of keeping promises real, from social custom to legal contracts. The acts of forgiveness and promise keeping redeem humankind and take us to a new

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level. They are also creative actions that confirm our uniqueness. In the way these actions are expressed, "nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live."

Labor, work, and action

Arendt delineates the three basic human activities of labor, work, and action:

- Labor is the activity of living, growing, and eventual decay that all humans experience; basically, staying alive. "The human condition of labor is life itself," she says.
- Work is the unnatural activity that humans perform within a natural world, which can transcend or outlast this world, giving "a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time."
- Action is the only activity that does not require things or matter, and therefore is the essence of being human. Action also transcends the natural world, because "men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world." By this Arendt means that human beings are communal, political animals who seek to do things that are recognized by others.

Rediscovering glory

In ancient Greece and Rome, Arendt notes, what mattered was what you did in the public realm. The lives and prospects of poor people and those without political rights (including slaves and women) were essentially carried out in the home; this private domain, whatever its benefits, brought with it no prospect of influence or real action. In contrast, men of means, free of the need to labor to survive and of the daily grind of the household, could be actors on the public stage, taking action to better or advance the whole of society.

In our time, she observes, it is the home that has become the focal point, and we have been reduced to consumers with little stomach for politics. We seek happiness while forsaking our privilege to do things that can change the world and benefit many. The ancient quest for glory seems alien to us, even distasteful, yet in reverting to being mere householders we are

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giving up our potential to have lives of truly autonomous action (what she calls the *vita activa*):

> *"The distinction between man and animal runs right through the human species itself: only the best (*aristoi*), who constantly prove themselves to be the best, and who 'prefer immortal fame to mortal things,' are really human; the others, content with whatever pleasures nature will yield them, live and die like animals."*

Through love is our glory revealed

Humans can know everything there is to know about the natural world, or the world of objects, but will always fall short of knowing themselves ("jumping over our own shadows", as Arendt calls it). *What* we are is our body, she notes, but *who* we are is disclosed in our words and deeds. We come to know who a person is not by being "for" or "against" them, but simply by spending time with them. Over a period of time, who a person is cannot help but be revealed. Thus, people live together not merely for emotional or material support, but in the sheer pleasure of seeing other people reveal their character. What is most interesting to us about an act is not the act itself, but the agent it reveals. The highest revelation of a person we call "glory."

Yet who we are may never be known by us; it is something that can only be seen fully by others:

> *"For love, although it is one of the rarest occurrences in human lives, indeed possesses an unequalled power of self-revelation and an unequalled clarity of vision for the disclosure of who, precisely because it is unconcerned to the point of total unworldliness with* what *the loved person may be, with his qualities and shortcomings no less than with his achievements, failings and transgressions. Love, by reason of its passion, destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others."*

Our ability to act gives all our lives a new beginning, providing fully justified hope and faith. Why faith? Because if we have the fundamental knowledge that people can act and can change, then it follows that we must have faith not only in them, but in the people we love and in the human race generally.

The beautiful paradox that Arendt leaves with us is that only

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through love (which by its nature is unworldly, private, and unpolitical) are we energized to have a real effect in public life.

Final comments

The conclusion of biologists and sociologists in the last 30 years that people are shaped by their brain's wiring, their genes, and their environment much more than had been thought would seem to pour cold water on Arendt's theories of action and decision.

And yet, from the viewpoint of history, which is after all the sum of millions of individual decisions, it would be wrong to suggest (as Hegel and Marx did) that the story of humanity involves a certain inevitability. Rather, as one of Arendt's key influences Martin Heidegger was keen to point out, individuals matter. For Arendt, history is a chronicle of the exceeding of expectations. People do amazing things that often even they do not wholly expect.

In the last pages of *The Human Condition*, Arendt admits that the "society of jobholders" that we have become allows people to abandon their individuality and behave as if they were simply a "function," instead of tackling head-on the trouble of living and truly thinking and acting for themselves. They simply become a passive reflection of their environment, an advanced animal instead of a real, aware, deciding person. For Arendt, being great is recognizing that you are not simply an animal with various urges for survival, and not merely a consumer with "tastes" or "preferences." Your birth was a truly new beginning, an opportunity for something to come into being that was not there before.

It can take a while to grasp Arendt's distinctions between labor, work, and action, and you may only understand her thinking fully on a second or third reading. Nevertheless, in its belief in the power of human action and unexpectedness, *The Human Condition* is a genuinely uplifting work.

Hannah Arendt

Born in Hanover, Germany in 1906, Arendt grew up in Konigsberg in a Jewish family. Her father died from syphilitic insanity when she was only 7, but she was close to her mother,

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an active German Social Democrat. Following high school Arendt studied theology at the University of Marburg, where one of her lecturers was Martin Heidegger. She had an affair with him (he was married), before leaving for the University of Heidelberg. Under her mentor, the philosopher Karl Jaspers, she completed a PhD dissertation there on the concept of love in St. Augustine's thought.

Arendt married in 1930. As the Nazi party rose in influence she was prevented from teaching in German universities and became involved in Zionist politics, from 1933 working for the German Zionist Organization. The Gestapo arrested her but she fled to Paris, working for another organization helping to rescue Jewish children from Austria and Czechoslovakia. Having divorced her first husband in 1940, she married Heinrich Bluler, but only a few months later the couple were interned in German camps in southern France. They escaped and found passage to the United States. Arendt received American citizenship in 1951. During the 1950s she moved in New York intellectual circles that included Mary McCarthy, worked as an editor, and developed The Origins of Totalitarianism.

Arendt became the first female professor of politics at Princeton University and also taught at the University of Chicago, Wesleyan University, and New York's New School for Social Research. She died in 1976. The first two volumes of her autobiographical The Life of the Mind *(1978) and her* Lectures on Kant's Philosophy *(1982) were published posthumously. A good biography is Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's* Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World *(1982)*.

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4th century BC
Nicomachean Ethics

"[We] become builders by building, and we become harpists by playing the harp. Similarly, then, we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions."

"And just as Olympic prizes are not for the finest and strongest, but for the contestants – since it is only these who win – the same is true in life; among the fine and good people, only those who act correctly win the prize."

In a nutshell

Happiness comes from expressing what we have rationally decided is good for us over the longer term. Happiness is not pleasure, but a by-product of a meaningful life.

In similar vein

Hannah Arendt *The Human Condition* (p 16)
Epicurus *Letters* (p 98)
Plato *The Republic* (p 232)
Bertrand Russell *The Conquest of Happiness* (p 254)

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for instance, does not provide the great meaning and satisfaction to be gained from reading Tolstoy.

Most people simply seek a life of gratification, but Aristotle thinks them no better than “grazing animals.” To have a “complete life,” we must combine action with virtue, constantly refining ourselves and developing our skills. Genuine happiness emerges through work on ourselves and our aims over time. “For one swallow does not make a spring, nor does one day,” Aristotle says, “nor, similarly, does one day or a short time make us blessed and happy.” He describes time itself as “a good partner in discovery,” revealing both our own natures and that of the world.

Friendship is part of a good and complete life, Aristotle says, because it promotes the sharing of reasoning and thinking. Through reasoned, constructive action, we help friends achieve their aims, and in doing so our own rational qualities, or our character, are enlarged. This naturally makes us happy. The same principle applies to the community or city in which we live. By working for its betterment, we naturally strengthen our own character and therefore increase our happiness.

Finally, Aristotle regards study as one of the great sources of happiness, if not the greatest, because it allows us the full expression of our rational nature. In appreciating philosophical or scientific truths and incorporating them in our own knowledge, we are reaching the peak of what it is to be human.

Aristotle’s pleasing conclusion is that happiness is not predetermined by fate or the gods, but can be acquired habitually by consciously expressing a virtuous life through work, application, or study. “[We] become builders,” he says, “by building, and we become harpists by playing the harp. Similarly, then, we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions.” In other words, we become a successful person through habit.

We should not judge a person’s life according to their ups and downs, but by the enduring virtues that they develop and express. This is the real measure of success. A successful and happy person is one who is stable in their cultivation of virtue, who makes the vagaries of fortune irrelevant. It is this stability, nobility, and magnanimity that we admire the most. “Activities in

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accord with virtue control happiness," Aristotle says.

Action and decision

Plato believed that the mere appreciation of virtue is enough to make a person virtuous. But for Aristotle, a good life must be one of virtue expressed in action: "And just as Olympic prizes are not for the finest and strongest, but for the contestants – since it is only these who win – the same is true in life; among the fine and good people, only those who act correctly win the prize."

He makes a distinction between voluntary and involuntary action. Young children and animals can take voluntary actions, but do not make real *decisions*, because these involve significant reason or thought. Since adults have the faculties of deliberation and decision, using these in a good way (for instance to pursue a goal that requires us to limit natural appetites) will make us feel we are living how we are supposed to – as rational beings focused on creating something worthwhile. We can wish for something, but to attain it we have to decide to take particular actions. Similarly, we can believe certain things, but it is action that forms our character. The "incontinent" person, Aristotle says, acts from appetite, or what is pleasant. In contrast, the "continent" person "does the reverse, by acting on decision, not on appetite."

Aristotle also makes an interesting distinction between action, on the one hand, and production. The end of production is an object, a thing outside ourselves, and requires the use of craft, or skillful manipulation. But acting well is done as its own end and need not result in anything in particular. Whereas production makes a thing, and the skill in production produces better or worse quality, action, depending on its quality, makes a person better or worse. It is therefore purer and more noble.

Though Aristotle's view on the difference between action and production was shaped by his elevated position in society, the idea has contemporary implications. As Hannah Arendt noted in *The Human Condition*, thinking of ourselves as "producers" and "consumers" is peculiarly modern. Yet we don't exist to produce, but to make a contribution to our community and society. This is why the *Nicomachean Ethics*, a book ostensibly about personal

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virtue, has many sections relating to friendship and the responsibilities of being a citizen.

Final comments

It is fashionable today for governments to be concerned with "gross national happiness" instead of simply economic output. Their advisers look to Aristotle's ideas on the good life and *eudaimonia* to guide policy making that might engineer the greatest happiness for the greatest number. This is a noble effort. Nevertheless, we should be wary about giving prescriptions for individual happiness. As Aristotle taught, every person will have a different route to the good life based on a unique potential that is theirs to fulfill. Rather than seeking happiness as a goal in itself, our challenge is to pursue the life most full of meaning for us – and in doing so, happiness will naturally follow.

Aristotle is often criticized for his remarks in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that circumstantial elements such as money, status, and family are important contributors to happiness. However, his focus on the meaningful life tells us that one does not need to have these things in order to be content or excited about life. If we feel that we are acting to fulfill our highest function, it is difficult *not* to be happy.

Aristotle

Born in the Macedonian city of Stagira (now northern Greece) in 384 BC, Aristotle was the son of a doctor to the king of Macedonia. At 17 he began his study at Plato's academy in Athens and remained at the school until his teacher's death in 347 BC. He then traveled to Turkey and the Greek island of Lesbos, doing his own research into what we now call marine biology, botany, zoology, geography, and geology. Aristotle married Pythias, one of his fellow students at Plato's Academy, but had a son, Nicomachus, by his mistress, the slave Herpyllis.

During Aristotle's lifetime the Macedonian kingdom under Philip and his son Alexander (the Great) was a conquering power, taking over Greek cities and the Kingdom of Persia. Aristotle enjoyed the patronage of Alexander the Great and was his close adviser until the last years of the emperor's reign,

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before he fell out of favor because of his Macedonian origins. He died on the island of Euboea, aged 62.

Two-thirds of Aristotle's work is lost, but his corpus covers a vast array of subjects, and he was considered the foremost polymath of his generation. Notable works include Metaphysica, *"On Interpretation,"* De Anima *or "On the Soul,"* Ars Rhetorica, *and* Magna Moralia.

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(1936)
Language, Truth and Logic

"Philosophy, as it is written, is full of questions … which seem to be factual but are not."

"If now I … say 'Stealing money is wrong', I produce a sentence which has no factual meaning – that is, it expresses no proposition which can be either true or false. It is as if I had written 'Stealing money!!' – where the shape and thickness of the exclamation marks show, by a suitable convention, that a special sort of moral disapproval is the feeling which is expressed. It is clear that there is nothing said here which can be true or false."

In a nutshell

Metaphysics, aesthetics, ethics, and theology are all meaningless
subjects, because nothing that is said in them can ever be verified.

In a similar vein

David Hume *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (p 136)
Saul Kripke *Naming and Necessity* (p 166)
Karl Popper *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (p 238)
Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* (p 300)

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might lack factual significance, but that is no reason to cast it aside, because the poet does not try to claim that poems are to be taken as true descriptions of reality. Their literal meaning is not what is generally celebrated. Metaphysicians, on the other hand, often insist that phrases about such abstract concepts as “the Absolute” present a faithful description of reality when they are nonsensical. Though an atheist, Ayer rejected the idea that one could even talk about atheism with meaning, because it was just as nonsensical to say “There is no God” as it was to say “God exists,” as neither statement could ever be verified.

Ayer’s thinking on verifiability and significant statements came out of his belief in “naturalism,” or the idea that philosophy should be treated on the same level as natural science; that is, putting every kind of assertion of truth under the closest scrutiny. Though he could not have hoped to dismantle the whole field of metaphysics, he could restrict philosophers to pronouncements that at least made sense.

Final comments

In stressing the limits of human knowledge, Ayer was very much the heir to David Hume, whom he revered. This, combined with the skeptical outlook of the Continental logical positivists, the language-analyzing influence of Wittgenstein, and the certainty of a 25 year old, made *Language, Truth and Logic* a powerful work.

For readers of today’s academic philosophy, which typically studies very particular questions in great depth, the broad sweep of the book is refreshing. Its brevity and lack of technical language make it very readable, and though many have noted that it is not totally original, it is still a brilliant entry point to analytical philosophy and logical positivism.

Following the success of the book, Ayer was once asked what came next. In his usual arrogant way, he replied, “Nothing comes next. Philosophy is over.”

A.J. Ayer

Ayer was born in 1910. His mother belonged to the Dutch-Jewish family that had started the Citroën car company and his father worked in finance. He was an only child and gained a

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scholarship to Eton College.

Studying philosophy at Christ Church, Oxford, his tutor was the philosopher of mind Gilbert Ryle. Ayer worked in British military intelligence during the Second World War, and held academic posts at Christ Church and University College, London, as well as being a well-known media figure.

*Ayer married four times, including one remarriage, and had many affairs. In a biography (*A.J. Ayer: A Life*), Ben Rogers recounts the time Ayer was entertaining some models at a New York Party, when there was a commotion in a bedroom. The supermodel Naomi Campbell was screaming that her boyfriend Mike Tyson was assaulting her. Ayer went in to speak to Tyson, who said, "Do you know who I am? I am the heavyweight champion of the world." Ayer politely replied, "And I am the former Wykeham Professor of Logic … We are both preeminent in our field. I suggest we talk about this like rational men."*

After his retirement, Ayer championed many progressive social causes, including reforming the law on homosexual rights. He was knighted in 1970 and died in 1989.

Other books include The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge *(1940)*, The Problem of Knowledge *(1956)*, Russell and Moore: The Analytical Heritage *(1971)*, Hume *(1980)*, Philosophy in the Twentieth Century *(1982), and the autobiographical volumes* Part of My Life *(1977) and* More of My Life *(1984)*.

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(2011)
The Ego Trick

"The idea of the self as a construction is one that many want to resist, because it seems to imply that it is not real. But of course constructions can be perfectly real."

"You, the person, is not separate from these thoughts, the thing having them. Rather you are just the collection of these thoughts … This is the heart of the Ego Trick. The trick is to create something which has a strong sense of unity and singleness from what is actually a messy, fragmented sequence of experiences and memories, in a brain which has no control centre. The point is, that the trick works … There is no single thing which comprises the self, but we need to function as though there were."

In a nutshell

The brain and body provide us with a strong and continuous sense of self, which gives us freedom to create who we are.

In a similar vein

Sam Harris *Free Will* (p 114)
David Hume *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (p 136)
Michel de Montaigne *Essays* (p 208)

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CHAPTER 4
Julian Baggini

Are you the same person today as you were as a child? Of course; however different you are now as an adult, your DNA is still the same – you are still "you." But what about someone suffering from Alzheimer's or who has had a brain injury? If their memories are no longer accessible to them, or they no longer have a firm sense of time, space, and other people, can it be said that the same self still exists? Where does this sense of "me-ness" come from? Is it real, or merely an illusion created by the brain and body?

Contemporary philosopher Julian Baggini begins *The Ego Trick* with a quote from David Hume (*Treatise of Human Nature*):

> *"For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call* myself, *I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure, colour or sound, etc. I never catch* myself, *distinct from some such perception."*

Hume famously suggested that there is no unitary, solid self or soul; instead, we are simply a bundle of perceptions that change constantly, and the way we perceive things over time seems to bear this out.

The area of "self" and "personhood" is a significant concern of contemporary philosophy and psychology, and Baggini, founder of *The Philosophers' Magazine*, makes accessible some of the most fascinating questions, exploring two conflicting views of the self: the "pearl" theory and Hume's "bundle" idea. Along the way, he speaks to nonscholarly people who have some special angle or insight, such as Buddhist lamas, people who have changed gender, or those who have had a loved one with dementia. The broad question he tries to answer is: "What are we and on what does our continued existence over time depend?"

The sense of self

The "pearl" view of the self says that, despite how much we change over a lifetime, there is some essence of "me-ness" that

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does not change. This self is free-willed and may even transcend the body after death. Despite much searching, however, neuroscience has not found any such pearl – the essential "I" does not exist in any particular part of the brain. Rather, several brain systems work together to give us a sense of being singular and in control. Other organisms, such as lizards, do not have a sense of self to the extent that humans do. They may have a sense of themselves in any given moment, but it is the sense of a self *over time* that makes us different. We have "autobiographical selves" that can create a richly detailed and complex story from our experiences.

"The older we get," Baggini says, "the less able we are to identify truly, with confidence, with our past selves … Our thoughts and actions are as inscrutable as those of strangers, or more so … At the same time, each of us has a sense of 'me-ness' which appears to be remarkably enduring." We may not be the same person we were 30 years ago, but we do sustain a sense of self through our life. In a way, searching for "what" we are, or our "true identity," is not the point. For Baggini, the real marvel is that we retain and maintain selfhood over a long period.

He mentions clinical neuropsychologist Paul Broks, who has worked with patients who have sustained brain injuries in car accidents. While observing how fragile the sense of self is, built as it is on a proper functioning of the brain, Broks also noted that even if one hemisphere of the brain is damaged, affecting memory or other functions, most people nevertheless continue to feel a unified sense of self. This movement toward self-feeling is incredibly strong, and for good reason: we cannot function as social animals without seeing ourselves and others as separate "I"s. Indeed, if "the self" was found in only one part of the brain (the pearl idea), any slight damage to that part would destroy the sense of "me." However, if the sense of self is a composite of elements, or an interaction between parts, then it is more likely to survive any trauma to or destruction of any of those components. Even if there is major damage to the brain, we are set up to be constantly creating a narrative sense of self.

Contemporary philosopher Derek Parfit characterizes personhood as meaning the possession of "psychological

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these roles, Magnanti simply saw them as different facets of herself and never experienced any psychological division. As Baggini puts it, “We are indeed less unified, coherent, consistent and enduring than we usually suppose, but we are still real and individual.” Walt Whitman expressed this more poetically:

> *“I am large*
> *I contain multitudes.”*

The postmodernist idea is that human beings are essentially constructs shaped by language, socialization, and power relations, but Baggini concludes that we are more than mere constructions: we have unity and continuity, even if we have no fixed essence or eternal soul. “The self clearly exists,” he says, “it is just not a thing independent of its constituent parts.”

Paradoxically, by fully experiencing all aspects and facets of our selves, we are not lost but can live a meaningful life. That we can do so, while at the same time rejecting the idea that we have an eternal essence or immaterial soul, is surely an indication of maturity.

Julian Baggini

Born in 1968, Baggini received a PhD in philosophy from University College, London. The subject of his doctorate was personal identity. In 1997 he co-founded The Philosophers' Magazine, *a quarterly journal, and he contributes to a variety of newspapers and magazines*.

Other books include The Shrink and the Sage: A Guide to Living *(with Antonia Macaro, 2012)*, The Pig That Wants to Be Eaten: And 99 Other Thought Experiments *(2008)*, The Ethics Toolkit *(with Peter Fosl, 2007)*, What's It All About? Philosophy and the Meaning of Life *(2004), and* Atheism: A Very Short Introduction *(2003)*.

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(1981)
Simulacra and Simulation

"Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it."

"No more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept … the real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control – and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these. It no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance."

"We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning."

In a nutshell

We no longer live in a world where signs and symbols point to truth; they *are* the truth.

In a similar vein

Noam Chomsky *Understanding Power* (p 68)
Harry Frankfurt *On Bullshit* (p 110)
Marshall McLuhan *The Medium Is the Massage* (p 196)
Slavoj Žižek *Living in the End Times* (p 306)

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CHAPTER 5
Jean Baudrillard

Jean Baudrillard died in 2007, and we are still absorbing and processing many of his ideas. The greatest theorist of postmodernity, he was strictly speaking a sociologist, spending 20 years in the sociology department at Nanterre University in Paris; his career spanned the student revolts of 1968, the fall of communism, and the rise of what he called the "hyperreal" order of media-centered capitalism.

Baudrillard's thinking marks a huge and rather subversive break from the traditions of Western philosophy, with its typical focus on questions of the self, free will, and knowledge, and even the existentialist's idea of living an "authentic" life. His vision was instead a world in which individuality is a myth, and where people are units reflecting whatever is happening in the media, their only purpose to consume images and signs; in this new universe, something is real only if it can be reproduced endlessly, and what is singular or unshareable does not exist.

Simulacra and Simulation was the book that made Baudrillard fashionable outside France, and it is surprisingly accessible. Though the examples he gives relate to culture and politics in the 1970s, for most readers contemporary instances of his ideas will easily come to mind.

The territory no longer matters

In one of his novels, Jorge Luis Borges told the tale of the mapmakers of a kingdom who created a map so accurate and so comprehensive that it spread like a sheet over the actual territory of the land. Though a nice story, Baudrillard argues that in the contemporary world such enterprises seem quaint, since all that really matters is the map itself; we do not try to pretend that it is simply an abstraction that helps us get to reality – it *is* reality. "But it is no longer a question of either maps or territories," he says. "Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference, between one and the other, that constituted the charm of abstraction."

Thus, the charm of a map lies in the room we give it not to be an accurate representation of reality. Now we make no such

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allowance; rather, we do what we can to make "reality" conform to our abstractions. We no longer live in a world of the dual: being and appearance, the real and the concept. What is "real" can be endlessly produced from computer programs and, most disturbingly, this new reality no longer has reference to some rational base of truth:

> *"It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real…"*

Baudrillard calls this new world the "hyperreal" and one of its interesting qualities is that it obviates the need for the imaginary, since there is no distinction between what is reality and what is imagined. We are left with a world that is a "gigantic simulacrum" (a simulation or likeness), one that is "never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference."

Though it is not an analogy Baudrillard uses, a useful one to think of here is paper money – it is hardly ever exchanged for the gold or silver it is theoretically convertible to; rather, paper money *is* money, not a representation of it. The fact that "in truth" it is simply paper is irrelevant.

In place of the real, we make a fetish of the past

For Baudrillard, the turning point in history was a transition from our acceptance of a world of signs that indicate truth or ideology, and that put a premium on secrecy, to a world that does not bother to make such an attempt. In the era of simulacra and simulation, he says, "there is no longer a God to recognize his own, no longer a Last Judgment to separate the false from the true."

When this happens, nostalgia creeps in and there is a surface hankering for "truth" and "authenticity." There is "Panic-stricken production of the real and of the referential, parallel to and greater than the panic of material production." When everything becomes abstract, the value of the "real" is inflated – but is it really the real that we want, or only the signs of the real? Once we are in the world of simulacra and simulation, it is difficult to step out of it; we barely know the difference between it and reality.

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Baudrillard suggests that we are like the Tasaday people, who were found by ethnologists deep in the rainforest in the 1970s. To avoid their being wiped out, they were moved to an area of unreachable virgin forest. This living museum aimed to keep alive their "realness" and allow them to live in their traditional ways, but sealing them off was itself a great act of simulation. Similarly, Western scientists spend a great deal of money conserving Egyptian mummies, not because ancient Egypt means anything to us, but because such objects are a sort of guarantee that old things have particular meaning: "Our entire linear and accumulative culture collapses if we cannot stockpile the past in plain view." Such "museumification" is the mark of a culture that hates secrets and wishes to "own" other cultures by dissecting and categorizing them. They are valuable to us as symbols of the fact that they were superseded – by us.

Baudrillard portrays Disneyland as a classic case of simulacra, because it is presented as an imaginary place only "in order to make us believe that the rest [of our society] is real." Disneyland preserves the fantasy of a separation between truth and fabrication, a fantasy we need in order to keep existing in a fabricated world. Places like this help us avoid the fact that the larger America itself belongs to the realm of simulation.

Politics in a hyperreal world

Baudrillard goes beyond the typical leftist/Marxist view of capitalism as immoral. Rather, capitalism is a "monstrous unprincipled enterprise, nothing more." Capitalism and the capitalist media focus on "the economy," "economic indicators," and "demand" as if these were the core of society, and in doing so, "every ideal distinction between true and false, good and evil" is destroyed "in order to establish a radical law of equivalence and exchange." In capitalism, we are mere consumers. Yet to preserve the illusion that we are free-willed citizens living in a dynamic democracy, capitalism manufactures crises that aim to stop us from seeing that its way of life is only a construct.

Political power as we witness it today – the elections, the obsession with presidential activities, and so on – is a charade, and the growing intensity of coverage is a sign that traditional executive power no longer exists. Power is, rather, in the whole

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