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About the Authors

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Also by Julian Baggini and Antonia Macaro

The Shrink and the Sage: A Guide to Living

Also by Julian Baggini

How The World Thinks: A Global History of Philosophy
A Short History of Truth: Consolations for a Post-Truth World
Freedom Regained: The Possibility of Free Will
The Virtues of the Table: How to Eat and Think
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Should You Judge This Book by Its Cover?: 100 Fresh Takes on Familiar Sayings and Quotations
Complaint: From Minor Moans to Principled Protests
Do They Think You're Stupid?: 100 Ways of Spotting Spin and Nonsense from the Media, Pundits and Politicians
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More Than Happiness: Buddhist and Stoic Wisdom for a Sceptical Age

Introduction

'Life doesn't come with an instruction manual,' so the old saying goes, and with good reason. The makers of phones, chairs, soufflés and other created objects have a clear idea of what kinds of things these are, what function they serve and how they should be made or used. And they can draw on all this knowledge to create manuals for users.

It's different for human beings. We were not created with a predetermined purpose. We find ourselves 'thrown' into the world, to use Heidegger's evocative expression. Or, as Jean-Paul Sartre put it, for human beings, 'Existence precedes essence.' We are, before we know *what* exactly we are and how we ought to live. We have to work out our purpose for ourselves: it's not a given.

There is, however, one kind of user's manual we can resort to, one that requires a small but significant change in punctuation. Strictly speaking, it is a *users'* manual – a manual *for* users written *by* users. These user-authors are the philosophers who have been grappling with the human condition for millennia, from the ancient worlds of China, India and Greece to the present day.

The words of dead philosophers speak to us across the centuries because human beings have a great deal in common with each other. There are universal human needs and common life situations. Each person, like a snowflake, is unique, just like every situation and every society is different. But we can draw on what we know about humanity more generally to illuminate particular cases.

Of course many believe we are created with a purpose by a designer God who gave us an instruction manual in the form of the sacred texts of their religion. Even they, however, would surely accept that they can learn from other traditions of thought and that the world's great philosophers have a great deal to offer.

This manual is a compendium of their wisdom. Unlike traditional philosophy reference books, it is not organised by the names of philosophers, schools or abstract concepts but by life situations. When people face problems in life they do not go looking for what the great thinkers have said about deontological duties, *a priori* principles or the difference between substance and attribute (even though all of these might actually be of use to them) – they want to know what philosophers have to say about relationships, work, illness, despair.

The relevance of philosophy to these questions has varied. For the ancient schools, questions of how to live were central. Most modern philosophers, in contrast, have had little or nothing to say about the art of living. However, in the last couple of decades or so, philosophy's public image seems to have changed from impenetrable scholasticism to something that could be useful to everyone. Stoicism in particular has grown enormously in popularity, and with its wealth of practical advice on how to live, it is easy to understand why. The Stoics excel in perceptiveness and clarity, and many of their words feature in these pages.

Many who have helped to create this shift have argued that it marks a return to philosophy's historic mission and that ancient philosophy was a form of psychotherapy. Supporting evidence includes the fact that both Albert Ellis, founder of rational-emotive behaviour therapy, and Aaron Beck, founder of cognitive behavioural therapy, were influenced by Stoicism. In particular, they acknowledge a debt to Epictetus' saying that 'People are disturbed not by things, but by the views they take of things.' The idea is that how we think affects how we feel, so we can change our feelings by changing our thinking.

According to Richard Sorabji, the idea of philosophy as therapy can be traced back to the fifth century BCE, when Democritus said, 'Medicine cures diseases of the body, wisdom frees the soul from emotions.' This view seems to have been retained by the later Stoics, Sceptics and Epicureans. 'Vain is the word of a philosopher which does not heal any [human] suffering,' wrote Epicurus. 'For just as there is no profit in medicine if it does not expel the diseases of the body, so there is no profit in philosophy either, if it does not expel the suffering of the mind.' Stoic philosophers also clearly stated that philosophy should be seen as a 'medical art for the soul'.

But the relationship between philosophy and therapy is not as clear-cut as it might seem. Apart from the point, already made, that some philosophical schools are much more relevant to daily life than others, there is also the issue that meanings can be lost over the eras, as well as in translation. When the ancients spoke of 'therapy', they did not mean exactly the same as we do. In particular, they did not believe that studying philosophy was a technique for feeling better. They thought that through philosophy we could come to see things more clearly and, most importantly, more truthfully. We would be 'cured' of the false beliefs and values that cause suffering, like attachment to the things of the world. This *would* make us feel better. But that was not the purpose.

If we take the Stoics, for instance, it's easy enough to agree that coming to see things truthfully means realising that many things we ordinarily pursue – wealth, popularity, success – have only limited value. But accepting the Stoics' specific views about what beliefs and values we should embrace is a bigger ask. To achieve Stoic calm and tranquillity we'd need to accept that virtue is the only true good and that almost all our emotions, urges, desires and attachments are misguided. Even if we were prepared to do that, 'curing' ourselves of our delusions would require a lot of hard work and training: reading, memorisation, repetition, self-examination.

This conception of philosophy is far removed from the current academic ethos as well as the usual understanding of therapy, in which the goal is primarily symptom reduction (for instance in anxiety or depression) and improved functioning. The range of current psychotherapies is wide, and some are more interested than others in self-exploration and development. But, generally speaking, instigating a radical overhaul of people's value system is not part of the remit.

Nonetheless, there is a sense in which even the more detached contemporary kind of philosophy can be therapeutic in the broad sense of the term. Much of our confusion in life is self-inflicted and our thinking can lead us astray. This is why philosophy can help us to make sense of things and give us insight into our predicaments. This book draws on philosophy's capacity to provide the tools for a better understanding of issues and dilemmas. A grasp of ethical theories, for instance, can help us to clarify how to handle a moral dilemma; a more sophisticated view of free will can enable us to get to grips with the extent of our responsibility; and even apparently dry logic is useful to help us to spot fallacies in our reasoning that result in false beliefs. People

can resort to philosophical counselling to take this process further and examine values, assumptions and ideas about the good life. This kind of therapy may or may not lead to changes in mood, but it will have done its work so long as it has helped us 'to show the fly the way out of the fly bottle', as Wittgenstein put it.

A wide range of perspectives is presented in this book, but we have unashamedly drawn more on the philosophers we think are the most insightful guides to everyday life – Aristotle and Hume in particular. Of course, we don't agree with everything that any of the chosen philosophers said, and we have selected aspects of their thought that we believe to be most relevant to today's world.

It is up to you to decide what is worth adopting. However, like the dishes in a buffet, not all combinations work equally well: ideas fit together into more or less coherent wholes. You'll get some sense of the kind of package we favour from the recurrence of certain key ideas. We haven't hidden our own views or tried to smuggle them in as though they were The Truth. Our biases are open so you can question them.

Our users' manual is not a set of instructions. A traditional manual tells you how things work and what you have to do to fix them when they don't. It is really a set of algorithms: linear, rule-based processes for solving problems. No such algorithms exist for human life. If they did, someone would have come up with them long ago and we'd all be getting on just fine.

A philosophical manual is therefore a set of tools to help you to live better, rather than a list of rules and instructions. Philosophy is as much about asking better questions as it is about finding answers. The wisdom it offers is best thought of not as a body of knowledge that directs each step we take in life, but as a way of thinking and reasoning about ourselves and the world that helps us to take those steps for ourselves.

Reading

Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1995)

‘It is bad today, and it will be worse tomorrow; and so on till the worst of all.’
Arthur Schopenhauer

Acceptance *see* Contentment

Achievement

Achievement has become one of the things we most worry about. Is our career stellar enough? Are we on a high enough rung of the housing ladder? Do our qualifications adequately reflect our abilities? The sense that we 'should' have achieved this, that or the other by a certain life stage can be tormenting.

Achievement regularly appears in theories of human needs and of motivation. It is also included in some philosophers' lists of requirements for a good life. John Cottingham writes that 'some degree of achievement is necessary for everyone'. Spending our days in a drug-fuelled stupor is no way to live. We need to develop our talents. Cottingham is realistic: people have different abilities and not everyone will become a top-level musician or athlete. But, he says, the 'truly happy life must be one where we are *stretched*'.

But there's another side to achievement. The Stoics illustrated this through the analogy of the archer. If we're trying to hit a target, all we can do is practise our archery skills as best we can. Once the arrow has left the bow, it is no longer in our control, and any gust of wind can divert it from the target. It is the same with goals: to achieve them we need a certain amount of luck. It's better, therefore, to concentrate on what is in our control, which is our mindset and actions. The final outcome is not up to us.

Another reason to be suspicious of achievement is that ultimately everything will crumble to dust. We might call this the 'Ozymandias' perspective, after Shelley's poem of the same name. The inscription on the pedestal of a shattered statue in the desert warns, 'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings; Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair! Nothing beside remains.' This vividly captures the vanity and folly of seeking achievement for the sake of elevating one's status or leaving a legacy.

So is achievement essential for everyone's flourishing or is it a false value, a vain temptation that we should resist? Shelley and the Stoics make a persuasive case that too much focus on it is unhelpful. But Cottingham is surely right that the sense of achievement that comes from developing our capacities can help to give life value.

One way to keep achievement in its place is to make it more ordinary. Montaigne casts doubt on the idea that it's necessary to achieve great things: 'We are great fools. "He has spent his life in idleness," we say, and "I have done nothing today." What! have you not lived? That is not only the fundamental, but the most noble of your occupations.' If we look at it in this light, we can discover little daily achievements that had completely passed us by. Sometimes even surviving is achievement enough.

A complementary approach is to focus more on process than on outcome. Kieran Setiya recommends maintaining a balance between what he calls 'telic' and 'atelic' activities. Telic activities have a clear endpoint that, once reached, exhausts their meaning or value – building a model boat or walking the Camino de Santiago, for instance. Drawing on the work of Schopenhauer, Setiya argues that the problem with

focusing too much on telic activities is that in a way it means constantly losing the very things that make our life worthwhile. (*See* **Boredom**.)

Atelic activities have no such point of completion. For example, any given walk or album will come to an end, but that doesn't mean you're done with walking or listening to music. It might be beneficial to reflect on the balance of activities in your life and, if appropriate, introduce more atelic ones, which Setiya says 'are not exhaustible'.

Zen Buddhism brings together the idea of focusing on the activity rather than the result and that of appreciating smaller achievements. This is captured in the old saying, 'Before enlightenment: chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment: chop wood, carry water.' If enlightenment is a kind of achievement, what is achieved is not something exceptional but a transformation of the unexceptional.

So by all means set yourself a goal, such as writing a book. But focus more on the *process* than on any rewards you imagine will follow its completion. That is certainly achievable.

See also: Boredom, Carpe Diem, Competition, Contentment, Cosmic Insignificance, Envy, Failure, Leisure, Meaning, Needs, Reputation

Reading

John Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* (Routledge, 2002)

Addiction *see* Self-Control

Afterlife

Death is both the most undeniable fact of life and one of the most difficult things to truly believe in. Sometimes it seems impossible that people who shared our joys and sorrows, who were so alive, have simply gone for ever. We may have intimations of mortality after near misses, illnesses or the death of other people, but in the normal run of things it's hard to connect with the idea that we too will one day simply cease to be. One way people commonly heal this fracture between how things seem and how they know they are is to believe in a life to come.

There are certainly plenty of philosophers who can bolster this belief, most obviously Plato's Socrates. 'When death comes to a man, the mortal part of him dies, but the immortal part retires at the approach of death and escapes unharmed and indestructible,' he told his assembled followers before his execution. 'It is as certain as anything can be ... that soul is immortal and imperishable, and that our souls will really exist in the next world.'

Nearly two millennia later, René Descartes expressed almost exactly the same view, arguing that the mind is 'really distinct from my body, and can exist without it'.

In essence, their argument for the immortality and indestructibility of the soul was that since thought and consciousness constitute our essential nature, and thoughts are not physical, the essence of human beings must be immaterial. Few people today would find this logic persuasive, as we now have overwhelming reason to believe that thought emerges from, and depends on, brain processes. All the evidence suggests that when the brain dies, so does the mind, and with it, the self.

Another source of potential hope for a life to come is found in Indic philosophies, almost all of which believe in rebirth. This is little comfort, alas, since they also believe that as long as we continue to be reborn we are condemned to the trials and tribulations of life – what the Buddhists call *dukkha*, or unsatisfactoriness. (*See* **Suffering**.) The true prize is not being born again, but breaking the cycle of rebirth. In these systems, it is not the personal day-to-day self that is reborn anyway. When we 'come back' in future lives we do not remember previous ones, which is why we don't know we had them. What returns is something thinner, a kind of bare locus of experience.

Those who seek the comfort of a life to come won't find it in philosophy today. If it can help at all, it is by persuading us that perhaps what we long for is not only impossible, but also not to be desired. The neuroscientist David Eagleman has written forty brilliant short stories, collectively showing that the idea of an afterlife is not as clear as it seems, and suggesting that many possible versions of it might be more of a curse than a blessing. In one you only ever see people you already know and are doomed to an eternity of tedium. In another, the well-worn question of how old you are in heaven is solved by there being multiple versions of you, each frustrated by the immaturity or decrepitude of the others. In yet another you see what might have been if you'd made different choices and are envious of your more successful selves. (*See* **What If**.)

Instead of hankering for an afterlife, we could learn to see it as a quixotic impossibility. This may seem too demanding, but Chinese philosophy shows that one of the oldest and largest civilisations on earth got along just fine without it. The classics of Confucius and Mencius are largely silent on what happens after death. They do have a concept of heaven (*tian*), but this refers to the guiding principles of the universe rather than a place we go to. Their philosophy is centred on the here and now and their morality on the duties and responsibilities we have to each other, showing us that living for what is valuable in this life does not have to leave an afterlife-shaped hole.

The only truthful way in which we can soften the full stop of death and turn it into an ellipsis is to think about how we live on in the lives, hearts and minds of others. After the end of every biography, there is an epilogue in the biographies of others. Perhaps the aspiration to live for ever could be replaced by the common Chinese ambition to 'leave behind a fragrance lasting for millennia'.

See also: Bereavement, Death, Meaning of Life, Mortality, Suffering

Reading

David Eagleman, *Sum* (Canongate, 2009)

Ageing

The terror of ageing is so strong that many feel it even when they are still very young. People turning 18 or 21 are often heard moaning that they are now 'so old!', much to the amusement of those who really are ancient. Even turning 30 or 40 is traumatic for many.

Given how old age is often represented, it's not surprising that we dread it. The horizons of T.S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock have shrunk so much that the most weighty decisions he has to ponder are whether he should part his hair behind or dare to eat a peach. Shakespeare's famous 'seven ages of man' speech in *As You Like It* pictures a 'lean and slipper'd pantaloon' with a 'shrunk shank' by the sixth age, while the seventh and last looks forward to 'second childishness and mere oblivion, Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.' Schopenhauer was hardly challenging received wisdom when he wrote, 'It is bad today, and it will be worse tomorrow; and so on till the worst of all.'

Ah, *the worst of all*. Added to our gradual corporeal entropy is the awareness that each day brings us closer to the grave. But cheer up – it's not all bad! For instance, in our libidinous times we have somehow come to believe that it is good, natural and desirable to have the sex drive of a hormonal teenager for as long as possible. But for Plato's Socrates, the calming of the libido was one of the advantages of growing older. Quoting Sophocles, he says, 'I feel as if I had escaped from a frantic and savage master.' It's not just sex. 'Unquestionably old age brings us profound repose and freedom from this and other passions,' he says. Slowing down has its advantages, and many older people report feeling a kind of liberation from striving and ambition, which enables them to savour the present more.

In Confucian philosophy, the old are more revered than pitied. There are various reasons for this. One is that Confucius did not fetishise novelty, believing that all the greatest wisdom came from the ancients, and that the old are its best repositories. Another is that, like many other Chinese thinkers, he believed that experience was essential for wisdom. One of his most famous sayings is 'At fifteen my heart was set on learning; at thirty I stood firm; at forty I was unperturbed; at fifty I knew the mandate of heaven; at sixty my ear was obedient; at seventy I could follow my heart's desire without transgressing the norm.' The young can learn facts, but wisdom cannot be hurried. Finally, Confucian ethics is hierarchical, and so elders always have some authority. Globally and historically, this view is much more common than those that see old age negatively.

Some philosophers are good adverts for old age by their example rather than by explicit teaching. Three months before his impending death, David Hume wrote, 'were I to name a period of my life, which I should most choose to pass over again, I might be tempted to point to this later period'. This was despite suffering from a 'disorder in my bowels' that was 'mortal and incurable'. Hume's cheerfulness came in part from his natural disposition, but also from an acceptance of mortality and an appreciation that the best things in life are simple and require no youthful exuberance to enjoy them. 'Never think,' he wrote, 'that as long as you are master of your own fireside and your own time, you can be unhappy, or that any other circumstance can make an addition to your enjoyment.'

Given his health problems, Hume might have endorsed the view that Seneca expressed in a letter to a friend: 'But come, did you not know, when you prayed for long life, that this was what you were praying for?' A long life brings many problems, but it is better than the alternative.

See also: Death, Gratitude, Health and Illness, Midlife Crisis, Mortality, Retirement, Slowing Down

Reading

David Hume, *My Own Life* (1777)
Seneca, 'Letter 96'

Aloneness *see* Solitude

Alternative Medicine *see* Evidence

Altruism

If you live in a decent-sized town or city, a walk down any main street quickly becomes a guilt trip. You pass homeless people begging for money or selling street papers, the destitute sleeping in doorways and, worst of all, 'chuggers' (charity muggers) with clipboards, flashing you a friendly smile and asking if you have time for a chat, when all you want them to do is *go away*. Turn on the television or open a newspaper and there will be more stories about people in need and charity appeals. You need to be either unusually altruistic already or happily selfish not to feel bad at these constant reminders of how much more we could be doing to help others.

When we experience this kind of dissonance, we tend to rely on mental gymnastics to make ourselves feel better. In this case, one way to ease our guilt is to persuade ourselves that no one is *really* altruistic and that every apparent work of charity is actually self-interest in disguise. (*See* **Selfishness**.) Do-gooders are simply making sure everyone, including themselves, thinks they are great.

Apparent altruism can certainly harbour selfish motives, in which case there is little to admire in it. 'When people sit by the bedsides of their sick friends, we honour their motives,' wrote Seneca. 'But when people do this for the purpose of attaining a legacy, they are like vultures waiting for carrion.'

But just because we often get some personal gain from altruistic actions, it doesn't mean we *always and only* act out of self-interest. It would be very odd if we praised people for doing good only if they didn't like doing it.

In reality, hardly anyone is an out-and-out egoist. Few people need persuading that we should think of others, as we tell our children to do. But the injunction leaves out the most difficult thing about putting it into practice: just *how much* should we think of others? Is it enough not to do them harm, or should we be actively altruistic and act for the best interests of other people?

There are philosophers who give us a pass on this by suggesting that all we need to do is pursue our own self-interest, as that is also in the best interest of everyone else. The eighteenth-century British philosopher Bernard Mandeville was one of the first to propose this, in *The Fable of the Bees*. Mandeville compared a society to a hive, in which every bee serves the interest of the whole simply by doing what it is born to do. Bees don't think of others, but their activity helps others nonetheless. Humans, he argued, are the same: the best way for everyone to be taken care of is for everyone to take care of themselves.

Mandeville's near contemporary Adam Smith is often taken to be suggesting something similar when he talked about the 'invisible hand' of the market. 'It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our

dinner, but from their regard to their own interest,' he wrote. However, this argument against excessive state regulation was never meant to suggest that all we ever need to do is look after ourselves.

In fact, Smith was a believer in 'moral sympathy', a basic human response to the distress of others that moves us to do something to relieve it. Mandeville's optimism that self- and other-interest are always in harmony was too optimistic for Smith, as it was for most other thinkers.

At the other end of the spectrum from Mandeville are the utilitarians, who argue that we ought to consider the welfare of everyone equally and never put our own interests, or those of our families, first. If you spend thousands of pounds a year on frivolous pleasures that add little (or nothing at all) to your overall welfare, when that money could have transformed the lives of the really needy, you've failed in your moral duty.

Peter Singer is currently the most famous advocate of this position. He argues that it is our duty to give away everything in excess of what we need for a moderately comfortable life. This is no more than the rigorous application of the apparently unarguable principle that 'if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it'.

This is a very high-minded philosophy. Few, if any, measure up to these demanding standards, including professed utilitarians. But for many it is a standard to aspire to. The only way to escape its logic, apart from ignoring it, is to deny either that everyone's interests count equally or that morality requires us to consider everyone's interests impartially. The first option seems indefensible. How could we justify the second?

The late Bernard Williams did so by appealing to what he called the 'separateness of persons'. Williams argued that we cannot treat our fellow human beings as though they were interchangeable bearers of well-being. A good life requires having special relationships with some people, therefore our duties and responsibilities will vary depending on the relationship. Sure, from a God's-eye perspective the life of your brother and a stranger a thousand miles away are equal. But we are not gods, looking down on all creation. We are human beings occupying particular parts of it.

The 'role ethics' of Confucius recognises this. In his system, moral obligations depend on your social role: the particular duties a father has to a son differ from those a ruler has to a subject or a teacher has to a student. Hence his version of the Golden Rule states only that we should not impose upon others what we ourselves do not desire. (*See* **Duty**.) This is a principle of non-interference that doesn't oblige us to help strangers as much as we would help ourselves or our family.

The Confucian Golden Rule contrasts with the stronger version held by Jesus, who said, 'Do to others what you would have them do to you.' Like later utilitarians, Jesus advocated a radical impartiality, which is why he told his disciples that if they wanted to follow him, they had to be willing to leave their families.

If we reject the demands of absolute impartiality, we still have reasons to try to be more altruistic. We don't need to beat ourselves up for being less than completely self-denying saints. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try to find the good will to go that extra mile to help others, motivated by nothing more than human sympathy.

See also: Charity, Duty, Empathy, Selfishness

Reading

Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees* (1714)
J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge University Press, 1973)
Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759)

Ambition *see* Achievement

Ambivalence

Think back to a time when you were so torn between competing options that you felt completely paralysed. It could be a big issue, with lots of possible repercussions – whether to give up your job, get married, sell your house – or a small one, like where to go on holiday, or which of two coats to buy. Not a good feeling, is it?

You don't have to be a chronic sufferer of ambivalence to appreciate what an essentially human experience it is. We value lots of things in life and would ideally like to secure all of them: we want the expensive coat but also to keep our hard-earned cash; we want the freedom of being single or self-employed but also the security of being in a relationship or a job. Unfortunately, real life doesn't often allow us to have our cake and eat it. It forces us to choose. We may try to avoid choosing, but that can be just another way of choosing, like when we wait so long that the situation is taken out of our hands.

Being stuck between competing goods is the plight of Buridan's ass, a legendary donkey that died of hunger while unable to decide which of two equal and equidistant bales of hay to go for. (In some versions, the choice is between a bale of hay and a pail of water.) It was named after the fourteenth-century French philosopher Jean Buridan, but the issue had been discussed in ancient times by the likes of Aristotle and the twelfth-century Persian thinker al-Ghazali.

The main question they were all grappling with is whether the impasse could be broken by the assertion of human will. Buridan argued that it couldn't, and that all will can do is 'to suspend judgement until the circumstances change, and the right course of action is clear'. Al-Ghazali was more positive, reckoning that we can will our way out of the predicament.

A modern philosopher worth consulting in relation to this is Isaiah Berlin. He argued that human values are plural and often incompatible. 'Values may easily clash within the breast of a single individual,' he writes, 'and it does not follow that, if they do, some must be true and others false.' Freedom and security, for instance, are both sound values. It just so happens that it is not always possible to realise both at the same time. Therefore, Berlin says, 'We are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss.' Or, as Kierkegaard sardonically put it, 'Marry, and you will regret it. Do not marry, and you will also regret it.'

At the very least, this should reassure us that ambivalence is a natural response to the complexity of the world. It may also hint at a way to overcome it. 'Priorities,' Berlin continues, 'must be established.' If we believe that certain conflicting values are genuinely important, we need to deeply reflect on ourselves and the situation and identify the value that is most worth affirming. If after thinking about it we still don't

know, then all we can do is flip a coin, perhaps literally. Better a random choice than none at all.

Whatever way out of the impasse we choose, we have to accept that to make any choice means closing others down. Every gain has a corresponding loss, and this is why ambivalence is such a human experience.

See also: Anxiety, Choice, Commitment, Dilemmas, Indecision, Regret, Uncertainty, What If

Reading

Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (Princeton University Press, 2013)

Anger

The consequences of excessive anger, or anger expressed badly, are many and potentially catastrophic: violent fights, falling out with people, careers and relationships ruined, harm to our physical or mental health. Anger is clearly problematic, but is it always wrong?

There was a longstanding dispute in ancient Greece between followers of Aristotle, who thought that anger could be useful if properly managed, and the Stoics, who had a zero-tolerance policy towards it.

Aristotle writes that anger – like feelings of fear, confidence, appetite, pity, pleasure and pain – can be experienced too much or too little, and the trick is 'to have them at the right time, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, and in the right way'. (*See* **Balance**.) This is rightly one of his most famous quotations – and quite a tall order.

For Aristotle, appropriate anger is an acceptable part of the human repertoire only when it is tamed by reason. If you took his advice seriously, you'd never shout at a shop assistant for something that is not their fault, or at your children when you've had a stressful day at work. You probably wouldn't shout very much at all, you'd just take the appropriate action to deal with the situation.

Seneca is more uncompromising: for him, anger is never acceptable. It creates its own momentum and can't really be controlled. Giving in to anger is like jumping off a cliff. He says that those who do it 'retain no independent judgement and cannot offer resistance or slow the descent of their bodies in freefall'. What he advises, therefore, is 'to reject straightaway the initial prickings of anger, to fight against its first sparks, and to struggle not to succumb to it'.

How do we achieve this? Mainly by challenging our thinking. We should remind ourselves that bad behaviour is endemic to human nature, says Seneca, so expect and tolerate it. After all, we are as prone to it as anyone else. Given 'the murkiness of our minds', we are all bound to make mistakes. 'To keep from becoming angry with individuals, you must forgive all at once: the human race should be granted a pardon.' Also, deep down we know that the kinds of things we get angry about are often trivial and inconsequential, and that it's wrong to waste our energies on them.

Next we must take issue with any sense that revenge is appropriate. Instead, the relevant question should be: what must be done for the best? Sometimes this might

mean letting things go, sometimes calmly confronting someone about some bad or thoughtless deed they've done.

Seneca also recommends using delay as a strategy. If we don't rush into anything, our anger will probably begin to back off of its own accord. And if we could only get ourselves in front of a mirror, we'd be put off anger by seeing how ugly we look when we're angry (although Seneca admits that by the time we made it to the mirror to check this, our outlook and demeanour would already have changed).

You might be thinking that a complete lack of anger can also be problematic, like when we can't find it in us to address some wrongdoing because we're too easily cowered or scared of rocking the boat. Sometimes those who are behaving badly need to know that they've gone too far or hurt people, and that there may be consequences for what they've done.

Seneca would agree that wrongdoing should be confronted. He just believes that anger is not the right tool for the job. Any action that needs to be taken – correcting someone's behaviour, for instance – can be taken calmly. This might seem to be in agreement with Aristotle's view about bringing anger in line with reason. But for Seneca, if anger responds to reason it is no longer anger.

The advice common to both philosophers is to act from a place of reason rather than agitation. In order to do this, we need to catch the first signs of anger. This is doable, says Seneca: 'Just as signs of a rainstorm arrive before the storm itself, so there are certain signs that announce the coming of anger, love, and all those storm gusts that vex our minds.' We just have to learn what they are.

A contemporary philosopher bridging the two positions is Martha Nussbaum. She writes that it is not wrong to feel outrage about an injustice, for instance, but that we can disentangle this from any desire for retribution. She calls this 'Transition-Anger', which is the response she characterises as 'How outrageous! Something must be done about this.' For Nussbaum, anger must be channelled towards constructive thoughts of what can be done, not useless grievance at what can't be undone. Political anger is a good example of this, when it is used as a powerful force for social change.

So if you're angry, take a few deep breaths. Remind yourself that bad behaviour is normal; you often do it yourself. Ask yourself how serious the issue is. If it isn't, let it go. If it is, think through what should be done to manage it in the best possible way. All good advice – if you're not already in a rage. The trick is to remember this the next time you feel the first twinges of anger.

See also: Balance, Calm, Emotions, Forgiveness, Protest, Self-Control

Reading

Seneca, *On Anger*
Martha Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness* (Oxford University Press, 2016)

Anxiety

If you've got any anxiety in your life, the chances are that the only thing you want to know is how to get rid of it. You might be able to tolerate the occasional bouts of anxiety that are part and parcel of life but don't interfere with it too much, like butterflies in your stomach if you're about to give a speech, have a job interview or go

on a date. It would be more difficult to live with the pervasive kinds of anxiety that can interfere with even simple daily tasks like getting on a bus or paying the bills.

But there is an alternative, philosophical perspective on anxiety that sees it as much more than a problem to be eliminated. This school of thought started with Kierkegaard. Anxiety for him was tied up with the Christian concept of sin and the possibility of faith, but the core of his thinking is universal. The theme was taken up by Heidegger and then by Sartre. Although they each developed it in their own distinctive ways, there is a lot of overlap.

The general picture is that anxiety inevitably arises from the human condition. Unlike inanimate objects and other animals, we are free and responsible for choosing what we do. This awareness of the future and its possibilities evokes anxiety. Kierkegaard likened it to the kind of vertigo we feel when we are on the edge of a cliff, aware that we could jump, and called it 'the dizziness of freedom'.

This anxiety is not the same as fear, as it does not have a concrete object. It is deeply unsettling, so we consciously and unconsciously try to suppress it, or avoid it by diving into everyday busyness or conventional social roles.

In Sartre's analysis, our main ploy for escaping anxiety is denying our freedom. He calls this denial 'bad faith'. We are in bad faith every time we make excuses and claim to be more passive and determined than we are. We may say we can't help it, or that we're bound to act in a certain way because of our star sign.

This denial of freedom has a positive side, in that it helps to keep life manageable. But, according to the existential philosophers, the strategy backfires and we end up living inauthentically, out of touch with who we really are. From this point of view, the bursting through of anxiety is positive, because it can jolt us out of our delusions and fake securities. It is a wake-up call to grapple with our authentic being.

This may not sound like the kind of anxiety you'd see a therapist about. But 'ordinary' anxiety and even apparently specific worries could well turn out to be unconscious attempts to conceal a deeper, more disturbing existential anxiety. While we're busy fretting about our career or financial position, deeper concerns are kept at bay.

The existentialist view is a challenge to the idea that anxiety is something to get rid of. From this perspective, a better strategy is to accept our anxiety and use it constructively, as a reminder that we can choose our own path. It is the price we pay for taking responsibility for our life. Kierkegaard wrote about learning to be anxious 'in the right way'. Perhaps that – rather than eliminating anxiety – could be our aim.

See also: Authenticity, Choice, Death, Fear, Free Will, Meaning

Reading

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Basic Writings*, edited by Stephen Priest (Routledge, 2000)

Appreciation *see* Gratitude

Argument

In a fractious world and in fractious homes, we might feel that the last thing we need is more argument. But if we want to cool tempers and understand each other, we actually need to learn to argue more, only better.

If that sounds odd, it's because the meaning of 'argument' has shifted over the centuries. Today it refers primarily to heated rows or disputes, but its Latin root, *argumentum*, meant a logical argument, coming from the verb *arguere*, to make clear or prove. To argue is not to start a fight but to make a case, rationally and, preferably, calmly.

Philosophy is (arguably) all about argument. What we now call philosophy emerged in ancient Greece, China and India, when people stopped founding their worldviews on myths and proclamations of authority and started looking seriously at the reasons and evidence for what they believed. Some of the earliest philosophical texts, such as Aristotle's *Organon*, were about the nature of argument itself.

One of the most remarkable of such works is the *Nyaya Sutras*, written some time between the sixth century BCE and the second century CE and attributed to Akshapada Gautama. In it Gautama describes the principles of proper argumentation in great detail. For instance, he distinguishes three kinds of inference by which we establish one fact on the basis of another. In the first we derive knowledge of an effect from knowledge of its cause: for example, we see the approaching rain clouds and know it will rain. In the second we infer the cause by observing its effects: we see the wet roads and know it has rained. Finally, we infer the existence of one thing from knowledge of what usually accompanies it: you see a corner shop and infer it will sell snacks.

None of these inferences is infallible: rain clouds dissipate, hosepipes spray roads and corner shops are idiosyncratic in their stock. But that is the nature of all 'inductive' arguments about the real world, that is to say ones based on our experience of how things are. Certainty is possible only in deductive arguments, which rely solely on the meaning of concepts – such as the mathematical argument that two plus two equals four, or the truth that anyone who is married has a spouse. But there are no irrefutable principles of logic that tell us that one thing can cause another. And as David Hume pointed out, we don't even observe causation – all we see is one thing following another. When the succession is regular we assume a causal link, but we neither observe nor deduce its existence. This leaves us on shaky ground. Bertrand Russell compared our plight to that of a chicken who sees that every morning the sun shines and it gets fed, and expects each new day to be the same. Only one of those regularities is because of a reliable rule of nature, however, as it discovers one day when instead of being fed it has its neck wrung.

The 'problem of induction' was also formulated by the fourteenth-century Indian Charvaka thinker Madhvacharya. It has never been satisfactorily solved. It's a reminder to be careful about assuming that because things have been a certain way in the past, they are bound to be so in the future. A good inductive argument can provide reasons to accept a conclusion, but not proof beyond any doubt.

Gautama goes into some detail about what makes for a good argument or for a bad one. For example, he defines *discussion* as adopting two or more sides of an argument in order to ascertain the truth. To *wrangle*, however, is to take part in an argument with the aim of winning, whether one is correct or not. To *cavil* is not even to want to win but simply to find fault in your opponent.

It is fair to say that much of what passes for discussion is really just wrangling or cavilling, but that's not necessarily because the discussants are insincere. We often

don't even notice ourselves that the desire to win or to show why others are wrong motivates us more than establishing the truth.

However skilled we are in the process of argumentation, we can't get anywhere unless we start from true premises: the statements we base our arguments on. That is why even Gautama made the odd dodgy argument. For example, he identified a form of argument he called *confutation*, which is summed up in Sherlock Holmes's principle that 'When you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.' It's a good principle, as long as you remember that finite human minds can never be completely sure they have eliminated everything that is impossible.

However, Gautama's example of this is not persuasive for anyone who does not already buy into some fundamental tenets of orthodox Indian thought. He asked if the soul is eternal or non-eternal, arguing that if we assumed it were non-eternal, it would not be able 'to undergo transmigration, and to attain final release'. He thought that was absurd and so 'we must admit that the soul is eternal'. However, if you don't accept the premise that souls exist, the argument doesn't get off the ground.

Argument of the philosophical variety is the best prophylactic against the shriller, combative variety. It encourages us to offer reasons for our beliefs rather than simply assert them. It makes the quest for truth rather than victory paramount. Perhaps most importantly, it commends humility, because anyone who knows how to argue properly also knows that certainty is rarely merited in this uncertain world. Sincere arguers are always open to new perspectives and to changing their minds. In a world of cavillers and wranglers, we need them more than ever.

See also: Evidence, Intuition, Knowledge, Rationality, Truth

Reading

Akshapada Gautama, *Nyaya Sutras*

Asceticism

Sometimes the over-consumption we see around us, or our own overindulgence, leads us to crave a leaner lifestyle. We don't quite imagine ourselves in a monastic cell, but we feel the need to counter the excess with some proper austerity. So we go for dry January, or start fasting or even having cold showers.

Nowadays we tend to dabble in this kind of 'clean living' for health reasons. In so doing we're dipping our toes in the waters of an ascetic tradition that has been around for over two thousand years. (Interestingly, the Greek term *askesis*, from which the English word 'ascetic' derives, was originally used in relation to the physical training of athletes and only later came to refer to intellectual and ethical development.)

A great flurry of ascetic movements occurred in India at the time of the Buddha. Some of the practices embraced by these renunciants were extreme, including remaining motionless and giving up food or even breathing, with obvious consequences. The Buddha himself joined one of these groups at first, but later concluded that a more moderate approach was a better road to awakening.

Then there were the Christian hermits – mostly men, some women – who around the third century started going into the Egyptian deserts in search of purification through

best riposte to this comes from Schopenhauer, who strongly argued that choosing to end one's life does not mean failing to appreciate its value. One remark of his is particularly poignant in the context of many assisted suicides: 'The suicide wills life, and is only dissatisfied with the conditions under which it has presented itself to him.'

See also: Bereavement, Consent, Courage, Death, Love of Life, Mortality, Pain, Suffering, Suicide

Reading

Jonathan Glover, *Causing Death and Saving Lives* (Penguin, 1977)
Mary Warnock and Elisabeth Macdonald, *Easeful Death: Is There a Case for Assisted Dying?* (Oxford University Press, 2009)

Authenticity

Modern Western culture values authenticity and 'keeping it real'. Electorates sometimes even choose bigoted politicians who come across as 'genuine' over evidently more competent ones who seem too polished and professional. But while it's clear enough to say that a painting is, say, an authentic Vermeer, what does it mean for a *person* to be authentic?

The obvious answer is something like 'being true to oneself'. Authenticity in this sense is getting to know who we really, deeply are, and acting accordingly. This reflects the common-sense assumption that there is an authentic self to discover and be true to.

Nietzsche had a different view. For him, being authentic was not about *finding* a true self waiting to be discovered but rather meant *creating* a self. We have to *choose* who we are and make ourselves the heroes of our own life. We create ourselves just as we might create a work of art or write a novel. The sign of authenticity is that the signature of the author of our being is ourselves.

There is certainly a lot of truth in the idea that we are always in the process of becoming and that there is no permanent essence of self that defines who we are. (*See* **Identity**.) If we are to undertake the project of becoming who we want to be, we need to reflect on what we value. Nietzsche invited us to do this with the question: 'What have you up to now truly loved, what attracted your soul, what dominated it while simultaneously making it happy? Place this series of revered objects before you, and perhaps their nature and their sequence will reveal to you a law, the fundamental law of your authentic self.'

However, there are two serious dangers of getting too carried away with the possibilities of self-creation. One is of ignoring ethical constraints and potentially creating oneself in ways that are morally objectionable. This is the mistake made by the students in Patrick Hamilton's play *Rope*. Their crude reading of Nietzsche leads them to a gratuitous murder, as a way of proving that they are not constrained by conventional morality. Murder is extreme, but there are risks with any view that puts self-expression first, without tethering it to ethical concerns.

The other danger is of ignoring the constraints of reality. We have talents, strengths and weaknesses, and we rightly take these into consideration when we decide to turn one way rather than another. If we become too intoxicated with the idea that we can

be the authors of our own lives, we can easily ignore these and succumb to delusions of grandeur.

One such constraint is that none of us emerges from a vacuum. Charles Taylor argues that our ideals of authenticity have become corrupted through excessive individualism. He agrees that 'There is a certain way of being human that is *my* way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else's life.' However, he thinks that the ideal of authenticity makes sense only if we recognise that our own values can't be completely torn away from shared notions of the good. We are all products of our times and cultures, hence authenticity has a social as well as a personal dimension. As he says, 'My discovering my own identity doesn't mean that I work it out in isolation, but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal, with others.'

The trick to this 'working out' of who we are is to be neither too individualistic nor too passively shaped by society. This seems to be a core message of Heidegger's changeable and obscure views about authenticity. He argued that most people are inauthentic because they let their lives be moulded by the social norms of the group, what he calls 'the They'. By doing this, they avoid facing up to their mortality and taking responsibility for choosing what to do with their lives.

Sometimes, however, the spell of complacency gets broken, and the reality, inevitability and suddenness of death burst into our consciousness. This allows us to leave behind the distractions and obfuscations of everydayness and focus on what really matters: that is when we become authentic, our own person.

However, for Heidegger this authenticity is rooted in historical traditions. It is not a question of creating our own morality, but of drawing on the genuine values of our community. When we do this consciously, for ourselves, we avoid the inauthenticity of simply following these values unthinkingly.

What this suggests is that authenticity is best thought of not as an outcome but as a way of being. We live authentically when we think through the values we want to live by, in dialogue with all that has come before and formed us. We are realistic about our inclinations, capacities and limitations, but avoid letting them completely dictate who we are. We neither unquestioningly accept the norms that we absorbed as children nor discard them just to make a point. This process of self-development inevitably has ethical implications: the values we embrace are part and parcel of how we act in the world and with others.

See also: Character, Death, Free Will, Identity, Integrity, Self-Actualisation, Self-Deception, Self-Knowledge

Reading

Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic* (Routledge, 2004)

Authority

There is more than one way to have a problem with authority, whether it is difficulty accepting the authority of others, not having as much of it as you would like, or not feeling confident to exert the authority you have. It doesn't help that authority has become something of a dirty word: there's no such thing as a good authoritarian.

For some, authority is a necessary evil. Thomas Hobbes believed that the state needed an all-powerful sovereign because only that could stop society falling into an anarchic struggle, a 'war of every man against every man'. In such a state, 'notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have ... no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law.' There would be 'no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death, and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'.

A gentler vision of authority can be found in Confucian thought. For Confucius, authority is not about one person or class dominating another. It is about a division of social and political labour, in which each individual plays his or her appropriate role. Parents have authority not in order to subjugate children, but to enable them to grow up safely and well. Rulers have authority not to tyrannise their subjects but to enable them to flourish in a peaceful, orderly society. (*See* **Duty**.)

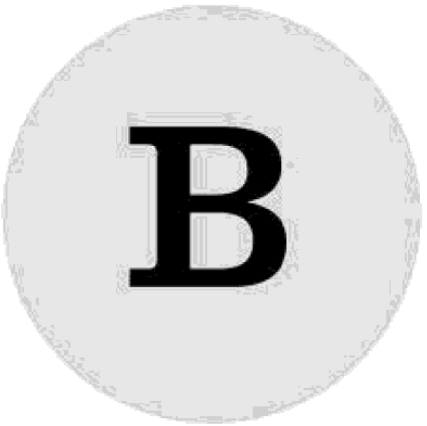
In this view, authority is a necessary good rather than a necessary evil. It is not simply a matter of power but of responsibility. Furthermore, the more authority a leader has, the less they have to resort to force. People follow a good leader the way the grass follows the wind, bending easily and naturally. Leaders can achieve this only if they are exemplary persons. Only tyrants need to bully, cajole or terrorise others into submission, thereby showing not authority but a lack of it. When it is exercised well, authority suits everyone.

Confucius offers us a way of thinking about our problems with authority. If our issue is with those who have it, we might ask whether they are abusing it or whether we are too proud to accept their rightful exercise of it. If we don't feel we have enough, is it because we are being stopped from using it or because we want to wield a power we have not earned? And if we feel uncomfortable exercising it, we should ask whether we are simply shirking the proper responsibilities of our role.

See also: Duty, Impostor Syndrome, Office Politics, Politics, Parenthood

Reading

Confucius, *The Analects*



‘Because we cannot be sure how long we will have our friends, let us eagerly enjoy them now.’
Seneca

Bad Faith *see* Self-Deception

Balance

Are you working too hard and not having enough time to unwind? Or are you spending too much time surfing the Internet instead of getting out and doing things? Are you doing too much or too little exercise? Are you too indulgent or too austere in your dietary habits?

The idea that there is a point of equilibrium between opposite extremes, which wise people are able to find, has an illustrious history in philosophy across the globe. In the Buddhist tradition, balance is implicit in the doctrine of 'the middle way'. For instance, the Buddha advises against the two extremes of excessive sensual gratification and excessive asceticism, saying that there is 'devotion to indulgence of pleasure in the objects of sensual desire, which is inferior, low, vulgar, ignoble, and leads to no good; and there is devotion to self-torment, which is painful, ignoble and leads to no good'.

In Western philosophy, the classic exposition of this principle comes from Aristotle, who says that things like 'fear, confidence, appetite, anger, pity, and in general pleasure and pain can be experienced too much or too little, and in both ways not well'. The challenge is 'to have them at the right time, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, and in the right way'.

Aristotle calls the ideal point between these two extremes 'the mean', saying, 'There is an excess, a deficiency and a mean' in most aspects of daily life. Rare exceptions include 'spite, shamelessness, envy, and, among actions, adultery, theft, homicide'. There is no such thing as an appropriate degree of these vices. Confucius had a remarkably similar view, and there is even a Confucian text called *The Doctrine of the Mean*.

The mean is a very practical principle that applies to all sorts of situations. If we are too impatient, for instance, we need to develop patience, but not to the extent that we become passive procrastinators. If we are not assertive enough and let people get away with too much, we have to become more forceful without tipping over into aggression.

The mean is not about bland moderation. Aristotle explicitly says that what he's talking about is not the arithmetic mean, in the way that five is the mean between nought and ten. Sometimes the mean is closer to one end of the spectrum than the other.

Nor is the mean the same for everyone: it is relative to each particular person and situation. For example, 'if ten pounds of food is a lot for someone to eat, and two pounds a little, the trainer will not necessarily prescribe six; for this may be a lot or a little for the person about to eat it – for Milo [a well-known athlete] a little, for a beginner at gymnastics, a lot'.

This is important. There is no generic mean between recklessness and timidity, generosity and meanness, laziness and overexertion. What we need to do is work out where we tend to sit on the relevant spectrum and what the mean might look like for us in any given situation. To do that, we need self-knowledge and reflection.

Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford University Press, 1984) §95
Zhuangzi, Chapter 18

Betrayal

It's difficult enough when something bad happens to us, but when the person causing it is someone we expected to help us through hard times rather than create them, insult is added to injury. Betrayal can sometimes seem trivial to outsiders, especially in the case of something common like infidelity. But for the person who has been betrayed, the experience can be one of the hardest to cope with, which is why even breaking a minor confidence can ruin a friendship.

Understanding why betrayal hurts so much can be the first step towards working through it. Trusting someone means placing intimate aspects of ourselves in their hands, a big deal that does not come easily to many people. So when that trust is broken, we are left feeling vulnerable and exposed. We are angry at the person who betrayed us, and at ourselves for having trusted them. The world seems a harsher place, in which we are wary of ever putting ourselves in the same position again. We retreat into ourselves, feeling alone.

Before thinking about how to handle betrayal, it is worth sounding the warning that not everyone who feels betrayed really has been. Jean-Jacques Rousseau is the worst philosophical example of this. In 1766 Hume took the Swiss philosopher, who was destitute and persecuted, to England and helped to find him a home and people who could support him. But for reasons that have never been adequately explained, Rousseau became convinced that Hume had been out to get him all along. 'I threw myself into your arms; you brought me to England, apparently to procure me an asylum, but in fact to bring me to dishonour,' he wrote to Hume. 'The public love to be deceived, and you were formed to deceive them.'

Rousseau's paranoia was pathological, but we are all capable of seeing treachery where there is none, or of interpreting understandable carelessness as malicious intent. Before trying to cope with a betrayal, it's worth asking whether it really was one.

If we do find ourselves seriously betrayed, we can draw on Martha Nussbaum's valuable insights. She rightly says that we have to accept the depth of our hurt, as 'grief and mourning are legitimate, and indeed required, when one loses something of such great value'. However, she cautions against anger, which unhelpfully keeps our focus on the wrongdoer and stops us moving forward. (*See* **Anger**.)

Interestingly, Nussbaum is also unpersuaded that forgiveness is essential in this process. One problem, she thinks, is that the forgiver can come to feel smugly superior. What we need instead, she says, is a 'gentle and non-resentful response to a loved one's wrongful act'. This means understanding their weakness, as well as accepting their apologies and attempts to make up for things. We can do all this without absolving them.

For Nussbaum, the most important thing is moving forward. With betrayal can come a loss of a central relationship and a gaping hole in our life. The best we can do is try to fill it. One way of doing this is building new bonds and strengthening existing ones. Others are learning how to enjoy being alone and cultivating valued activities. This isn't easy, so we should not berate ourselves for finding it hard.

An essential part of the process is the realisation that we must be willing to leave ourselves open to new betrayals if we are to have any close relationships again. (*See* **Vulnerability**.) Permanently retreating into a protective shell is sure to get in the way of a well-rounded life. But we can use our wounds as reminders not to expect too much of our fellow human beings. As the much-wronged Hume put it, 'to a Philosopher & Historian the Madness and Imbecility & Wickedness of Mankind ought to appear ordinary Events'.

See also: Anger, Forgiveness, Friendship, Loyalty, Lying, Relationships, Vulnerability

Reading

Martha C. Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness* (Oxford University Press, 2016)

Blame *see* Responsibility

The Body

Anything you have to live with 24/7 is probably going to become somewhat problematic. Take our bodies. You may not be sick of the sight of yours, but according to a survey by *Psychology Today*, 56 per cent of women and 43 per cent of men are dissatisfied with their overall appearance. Our abdomens, weight and muscle tone bother us the most, and many dislike a particular body part or feature, such as their noses, eyebrows, ears or knees.

We might say that we have a difficult relationship with our bodies. But that expression itself suggests one source of the problem. We have become used to thinking of 'our bodies' as though they were not the same as 'us', regarding them instead like vehicles we inhabit, necessary for getting around but not integral parts of what we really are.

In many philosophical traditions, this way of thinking is given intellectual support by theories that see the real self as a kind of non-physical soul 'within'. Both Plato and Descartes promoted this 'dualist' idea, which became prominent in Western philosophy. (*See* **Afterlife**.)

It is obvious even to many dualists that this picture struggles to do justice to the evident inseparability of mind and body. Descartes explicitly accepted this, saying, 'I am not merely in my body as a sailor is in a ship. Rather, I am closely joined to it – intermingled with it, so to speak – so that it and I form a unit.' His philosophy, however, could not account for how this was possible.

Many Indian thinkers have also advocated the essential difference of soul and body. One major difference with the Western tradition is that most Indian schools believe that practices involving the body, such as yoga, are necessary to liberate the soul from its mortal shell. The *Kaushitaki Upanishad*, for instance, teaches the 'sixfold yoga', which includes mental and physical exercises of 'restraint of the breath, withdrawal of the senses, meditation, concentration, contemplation, absorption'.

There have been plenty of thinkers who have resisted this cleavage of the human being into two radically different parts. For instance, Aristotle did not see the soul as a non-material substance but rather as the organising principle that gives life to the

organism. This is essentially the contemporary scientific view: that however mysterious mind and consciousness are, they are the product of organic, material things and nothing more.

Perhaps the most thorough attempts to put the body at the heart of the human experience were made by the twentieth-century French and German phenomenologists, for whom the body is not just another object in the world but the subject of lived experience. We need to be reminded of this, because when our bodies are working as they should, they almost disappear from our consciousness, which is instead turned towards our environment. As Drew Leder puts it, when the body is functioning well, it is 'a transparency through which we engage with the world'. Paradoxically, because our bodies are ever-present, they seem to be absent. They only become present to us in consciousness when we find they are unable to do what we want them to do, or when we have acute bodily sensations like sexual arousal.

Awareness of our embodiment is most acute when our bodies play up. Havi Carel writes that while we usually take it for granted that the body is 'a healthy functioning element contributing silently to the execution of projects, in illness the body comes to the fore'. When we are ill, it 'is not just a body function that is disrupted. Rather, one's entire way of being in the world is altered.' This experience is so different from the ordinary invisibility of the body that it feels uncanny. When the body, says Leder, 'is rendered opaque through loss of function, we become aware of it as an alien presence'.

What does this mean for our experience of the body in daily life? It's more than just something to think about the next time you're ailing with flu – it is a reminder that the body is 'our general medium for having a world', as Maurice Merleau-Ponty put it. Instead of thinking about the body – what we look like, or what may or may not be wrong with us – it may be more illuminating to attend closely to our *embodied experience*. By paying attention to our bodies, we can become more aware of the astonishing process through which our world comes into being.

It does not require the sight of an amazing sunset or a remarkable physical feat to evoke this. It could be ordinary things, like the sensation of one hand on another, or feeling the cold air on the tip of our nose. The magic is that it is through the body that we encounter the world.

See also: Afterlife, Asceticism, Food, Health and Illness, Mortality

Reading

Havi Carel, *Illness* (3rd edition, Routledge, 2018)

Boredom

Ordinary boredom isn't very interesting – it's just a sign that we need to change what we're doing or look harder for what might be absorbing in whatever is driving us to tedium. However, chronic feelings of global boredom, which can stop us fully engaging with the world, are more of a problem.

Deep and all-pervasive forms of boredom have historically been seen as sicknesses of the soul and given special names such as ennui and accidie. Kierkegaard, for example, thought that 'Boredom is the root of evil.' For him, it is not an absence of stimulation or of things to do but an absence of meaning, a sense of emptiness. 'How dreadful boredom is – how dreadfully boring.' You can't break this kind of boredom by simply