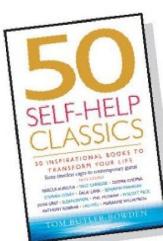
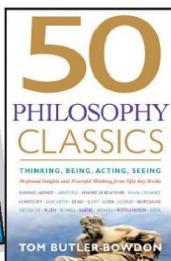
# TOM BUTLER-BOWDON

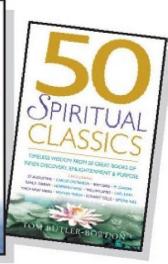
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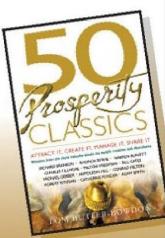
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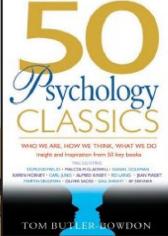
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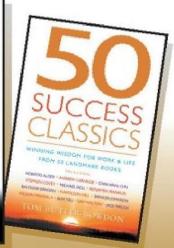












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# Introduction

"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 (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 allcomers.

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

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 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 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 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 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 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 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 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 allimportant, 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 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.

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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 ... 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. 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 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** 



# 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)

# 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 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 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 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 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, 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).

# 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)

# CHAPTER 2 Aristotle

So great was his perceived authority on a range of subjects, from physics to psychology to biology, that throughout the Middle Ages Aristotle was known simply as "the philosopher." Dante called him the "master of those who know." Aristotle was a crucial influence on Thomas Aquinas and also Islamic philosophers such as Averroes.

Aristotle's rigor and relentless quest to categorize everything have had a massive impact on philosophical and scientific thinking over the last 2,000 years, instituting a very rational, right-brain way of seeing that is the essence of Western civilization.

It is often said that the history of philosophy can be divided between Platonists and Aristotelians. While Plato believed that everything we perceive in the physical world has an underlying metaphysical reality and that "truth" lies behind or beyond the world of appearances, his student Aristotle was much more of a nuts-and-bolts philosopher, interested in the world as we see it. After studying under Plato for 20 years, Aristotle came to the view that our understanding of the world is necessarily based in our five senses; his rigorous and analytical mind broke things down to their component parts, including ostensibly vague elements such as happiness and virtue.

The Nicomachean Ethics (dedicated to his son, Nicomachus) is the best expression of Aristotle's moral philosophy. His scientific works are now mainly of interest to scholars, but the Nicomachean Ethics continues to be influential, providing a recipe for the good life that is still discussed and applied today; his concept of eudaimonia (loosely, "happiness"), for instance, has shaped the contemporary positive psychology movement. Though the work was compiled from lecture notes and so seems somewhat incomplete and unpolished, it can be read without great difficulty.

# What is our function?

As distinct from Plato's concept of "form," which indicates the reality underlying things, Aristotle's use of form refers simply to their order or structure. To understand what an object is (whether it is a chair or a person), you have to know its function. We do not appreciate a boat, for instance, as pieces of joined-up wood, but as something that can carry us across water. Aristotle's "final cause" says that everything in nature is built with an end or purpose in mind. A tree or a person is programmed to flourish in a certain way, and it uses the conditions available to do so.

However, what could we say is the function of human beings? Not simply growing, as this would make us the same as a plant. Not simply seeing or hearing or smelling, as we have this in common with a horse or an ox. What is unique to us, Aristotle says, is the ability to act according to our reason. A thing's essence is how it is organized, and humans, with their ability to organize their own mind and actions, are unique in nature. A person is ultimately the virtues they have cultivated and the choices they have made, so one who organizes their life according to the highest virtues can become great.

We do not grasp someone's identity through seeing them as a collection of billions of cells, but through what differentiates them. It is in the appreciation of their virtues, or their art or skills honed over a lifetime, that we can grasp their essence or function. A flautist or a sculptor, Aristotle says, is doing well if they are playing the flute superbly or sculpting with great power. Success depends on the fulfillment of function.

# Achieving happiness

The starting point of Aristotle's ethical theory is happiness, because he believes people to be rational creatures who make decisions that will lead to their ultimate good. Though eudaimonia is often translated as "happiness," it can also be read as "doing well," "success," or "flourishing."

As rational beings, our greatest happiness comes from choices that we arrive at through reason. We work out what is best for us in the long run, and in following that path happiness comes as a by-product. A life of mere pleasure, since it

deprives us of rational, purposeful activity over a lifetime in the quest of a goal, will not make us happy. The most virtuous path is that which gives us the greatest genuine (rather than fleeting) pleasure. The pleasure of reading a light romance or a thriller, 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 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 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, 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.

### 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)

# CHAPTER 3 A.J. Ayer

At the age of 22 and fresh from Oxford University, Alfred Ayer traveled to Austria to meet with the Vienna Circle, a group of physicists, mathematicians, and philosophers (including Moritz Schlick, Rudolf Carnap, Karl Menger, and Kurt Gödel) working under a shared belief in "logical positivism," the view that the only real knowledge is fact based. Strongly influenced by Wittgenstein's analysis of language and meaning, the group sought to reframe knowledge in terms of the principle of verification, and had a massive effect on twentieth-century philosophy and science.

Through Language, Truth and Logic and other writings Ayer became one of the main exporters of these ideas to Britain and America. Written when he was only 25, the book became famous for its forthright, even aggressive exposé of the claims of metaphysics, but it also covers ethics, probability, and language.

#### The verification principle

Ayer's principle of verification states that a sentence is meaningful only if there are certain circumstances in which we, the language users, can agree with its truth, for the truth of a meaningful sentence must correspond with a possible, observable situation. For example, "There are aliens on Mars" is meaningful, because we know what it would take to confirm it: an observation or other sign of aliens on Mars. Note that we're less concerned with whether or not the sentence is true in itself, only whether or not it is meaningful; that is, verifiable.

Yet Ayer allows some leeway by stressing that we need only confirm claims to be *probably* true, rather than *decisively* true, for them to be meaningful. This is because there are many propositions that, even after making a huge number of observations, we can only confirm to be probably correct. The most common example of such a proposition is a universal law, such as that expressed by the sentence "all arsenic is poisonous." We take this to be a meaningful sentence, but

because of the well-known problem of induction, it can only be confirmed as probably true given an increasing number of observations. No number of observations could confirm that all arsenic is poisonous, as we cannot extrapolate with more than probable certainty from any particular examples to the general case.

Ayer also puts forward the idea of emotivism, that statements concerning morality are value judgments driven by the emotion or sentiment of the utterer. Because they cannot be verified by any objective moral "facts" or experience, they have no cognitive significance and are meaningless. When someone says, for instance, "Mary is a good person," they are not defining any objective truth or situation, merely expressing their feeling for Mary. Similarly, when we hear the statement "War is wrong," because it is not a proposition that can ever be conclusively proven one way or the other but is opinion, it is of low or no value. Most language says more about the speaker than it does about "reality."

#### Metaphysics is meaningless

By applying the principle of verification to philosophy, Ayer comes to question the very basis of metaphysics, aesthetics, ethics, and theology. He considers a typical sentence from a metaphysics book at the time, picked out at random from F.H. Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*: "The Absolute enters into, but is itself incapable of, evolution and progress."

Ayer insists that there is no situation in which one would be able to observe that this sentence is true. Moreover, what can it possibly mean for anybody to say that "the Absolute" (whatever that may be) "enters into evolution"? If a sentence is only meaningful if it is, in principle, verifiable, it is unclear under what circumstances (if any) one could observe the truth of Bradley's statement. How could one ever tell that the Absolute was, or was not, evolving? On the assumption that Bradley is using these words with their common meaning, Ayer concludes that we ought to judge the sentence as meaningless.

Ayer is concerned with factual significance. For instance, the factual significance of "It's raining!" is that it is raining –

precisely the kind of meaning that metaphysical statements lack. This is to be distinguished from other senses of meaning that a sentence may have, such as emotional significance; poetry, for instance, 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 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).

### 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)

# 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 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 connectedness and continuity." The "ego trick," Baggini explains, is the brain and body's creation of "a strong sense of unity and singleness from what is actually a messy, fragmented sequence of experiences and memories." Precisely because there is no single control center in the brain, the trick works.

#### What are we?

If the self has no real center, can it still be said that a person has a "character"?

Baggini cites a number of psychology experiments suggesting that our confidence in character is misplaced; our environment can have a much bigger effect on what we do. One example is Stanley Milgram's famous "obedience to authority" experiments, in which people willingly gave electric shocks that they knew would be harming people, simply to please those in charge of the experiment. The subjects were otherwise normal, considerate people, but it turned out that seeking approval was more important than compassion for others. In the equally well-known Stanford Prison Experiment, Philip Zimbardo simulated a prison environment over the course of five days. After only a day or so, usually pleasant college students were willing to act terribly to those under their control. "The human mind gives us templates or potentials to be anything at any time," Zimbardo told Baggini. Inbuilt human dignity and character are myths.

John Doris's book *Lack of Character* noted that "situational factors are often better predictors of behaviour than personal factors." Baggini suggests that plenty of Germans living under the Third Reich would otherwise have led "blameless lives" if they had not been put in an environment that brought out their worst selves. By the same token, "many people are able to live good, moral lives only because circumstances have not tested them."

Philosopher William James pointed out just how much we are shaped by our social environment; our family and friends make us who we are. By living with others we take on their

view of the world, and they ours. James noted that clothes become part of our identity; the same could be said for houses, cars, and other belongings. A philosopher colleague of Baggini's wondered whether, since our smartphone contains so much information about us, it isn't in a sense a part of us. Where do "you" stop and the objects around you begin? "It is our place in the world that defines who we are," Baggini argues. "The relations that constitute our identity are the relations we have with others, not those we hold between thoughts and memories in our minds." We are our collection of roles.

And yet, Baggini observes, we are not *just* a collection of roles – we have a psychological sense of self that remains whatever role we are playing in life. Equally, James saw selfhood as the "continuum of feelings found in the 'stream' of subjective consciousness." No matter what our experiences or environment, if we have this flow of feelings and thoughts then we will continue to have a self.

#### Creating a self

Baggini notes that Buddhist philosophy is remarkably in line with contemporary research into the self. The Buddha believed that we have no fixed, unchanging essence; rather, we are the sum of our bodily experiences, thoughts, and feelings. This is much like Hume's bundle idea, except that Buddhism is focused on the great positive *potential* entailed in having no fixed self. Over a lifetime, through the refinement of perceptions, thoughts, and actions, we can in a very conscious way *create* a self. As it is said in the Buddhist text the *Dhammapada*:

"Well-makers lead the water; fletchers bend the arrow; carpenters bend a log of wood; wise people fashion themselves."

Baggini admits that seeing the self as a construction is confronting, because it suggests that there is no "true" sense of self at the center. And yet, plenty of things we take to be real are constructions: a tree is a collection of billions of atoms working together as a system, and the internet is not a single thing but a network. Just because something is a composite of

parts does not make it any less real or powerful.

#### Final comments

One of Baggini's interesting examples is Brooke Magnanti, a woman who managed to combine the roles of academic researcher, blogger, and prostitute, famously revealed in her "Belle de Jour" blog. No matter how apparently different each of 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).

## 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)

## 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 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.

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 system, a fact that the media frenzy around politics seeks to obscure. And as people hate politics more and more, the charade will only grow more intense in order to evoke the feeling that it is real. Baudrillard portrays the Kennedy assassinations as the last real political deaths in the West, since JFK and Bobby were seen to be truly exercising power. They were too real, and so they had to go. Even so, Baudrillard says that in an age of simulation, actual assassinations are no longer required; they can be simulated. as with Watergate and Nixon's political decapitation, which became the template for the modern political death ritual. The more important you are, the greater the chance of your "sacrifice."

#### The hyperreal media society

In 1971, a television crew lived with a Californian family, the Louds, for seven months, filming their every move. The family fell apart under the gaze of 20 million viewers, which led to the question of how much of a role the show played. The producers marketed it as being "as if the cameras were not there," which Baudrillard describes as a Utopia of "reality" that was of course a brilliant fake, but it exemplified the pleasure that we, the audience, have when something real becomes hyperreal.

The typicalness of the family (upper-middle-class Californians, decorative housewife, three garages, several children) ensured that they would be destroyed, since what a hyperreal culture needs is frequent sacrifices. However, in this modern version, "Because heavenly fire no longer falls on corrupted cities, it is the camera lens that, like a laser, comes to pierce lived reality in order to put it to death." Beaudrillard wonders: does reality television "refer to the truth of this family or to the truth of TV?" Television became the Louds' truth, because in a culture based on simulacra and simulation, "it is

TV that is true, it is TV that renders true."

In a fascinating analysis of 1970s cinema, Baudrillard discusses the connection between real events and films. He argues that the nuclear spill at Three Mile Island in the United States had its Hollywood counterpart in *The China Syndrome*; the film event became as important as the real, taking on a truth greater than the artistic expression. This is the sort of violence done to truth in a hyperreal world.

Presaging the rise of the internet and the social media phenomenon, Baudrillard notes that people are now measured by the extent of their involvement in the flow of media messages. "Whoever is underexposed to the media is desocialized or virtually asocial," he says, and the flow of these messages is unquestioned as a good that increases meaning, just as the flow of capital is considered to increase welfare and happiness. One of the standout lines of the book is:

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

He asks: "Are the mass media on the side of power in the manipulation of the masses, or are they on the side of the masses in the liquidation of meaning, in the violence perpetrated on meaning, and in fascination?" Whereas in the old order people worried about the first, surely the second is more disturbing.

Advertising is conventionally seen as superficial in relation to the actual things and products to which it refers, but in Baudrillard's thinking advertising is the core of our civilization. The commodities to which it points are relatively valueless – what matters is our identification with the stories, signs, and imagery that front those commodities; it is *these* that we desire and consume. We go shopping not so much to acquire things, but to keep ourselves within the boundaries of the hyperreal (not to want to consume these signs and symbols is subversive). The notion of a free-willed, rational individual is a total myth; we are best seen as entities fully wrapped up in, and part of, the technology and consumer culture.

#### **Final comments**

Baudrillard's compelling argument was that the universe we now inhabit is totally different from the modernist world of "clashes of ideologies." He argued that the terrorist attacks on 9/11 were not a case of the "clash of civilizations," or of Islam against America, but rather the focal point of a world reacting against its own globalization and shift into the hyperreal, a sort of last, horrible shot fired against the encroachment of media and technology into all aspects of our lives, subsuming value systems.

Philosophers have spent centuries arguing about the relative weight between "subject" (I) and "object" (the world), but Baudrillard saw the debate as having long since become insignificant – the object had won hands down. A person today is not a project in selfhood, as many traditions of philosophy and theology have told us, but more like a machine that consumes and reproduces the ideas and images that are current in the media, advertising, and politics. And, most disturbing of all, the replacement of reality with hyperreality is what Baudrillard calls the "perfect crime," because most of us are barely aware that it has ever happened.

#### Jean Baudrillard

Baudrillard was born in Reims in 1929. His parents were civil servants and his grandparents farmers. He was the first in his family to go to university. From 1966 to 1987 he held positions at Nanterre University, and then taught at the European Graduate School until his death in 2007.

His first book, The Object System (1968), was greatly influenced by Roland Barthes, and in his early phase Baudrillard was considered a post-Marxist. Later works relating to the media drew on the ideas of Marshall McLuhan. Simulacra and Simulation was an inspiration for the film The Matrix, which offers an idea of what might happen if hyperreality is taken to its logical, all-pervading extent.

Other books include Consumer Society (1970), Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign (1972), The Mirror of

Production (1973), In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities (1983), America (1986), Forget Foucault (1987), The Gulf War Did Not Take Place (1991), and The Perfect Crime (1995).

### 1949 The Second Sex

"One is not born a woman: one becomes a woman."

"The individual life history of woman – because she is still bound up in her female functions – depends in much greater degree than that of man upon her physiological destiny; and the curve of her destiny is much more uneven, more discontinuous, than the masculine curve."

#### In a nutshell

The concept of "Other" helps us understand the position and power of women through history.

#### In a similar vein

Jean-Paul Sartre Being and Nothingness (p 266)

## CHAPTER 6 Simone de Beauvoir

At 40, Simone de Beauvoir was the author of several well-received novels, but was better known as Jean Paul-Sartre's long-time companion. All that changed with the release of *Le Deuxième sex*. The book was a bestseller from the start, and de Beauvoir found herself the most controversial woman in France.

Given her relatively privileged position – teaching career, university degree, movement in Parisian intellectual circles – de Beauvoir herself had never felt much of a sense of injustice or inequality. Nevertheless, she began to realize that people saw her as Sartre's inferior merely because she was female. When she sat down to write *The Second Sex*, she was surprised to find herself putting down the most essential fact of her existence: "I am a woman."

The Second Sex is not simply about the role of women in history or society, but about "Woman" as an archetype and philosophical category that is interchangeable with the idea of "Other." This philosophical base raises the book above other feminist writing and makes it fascinating reading.

The work spans 700 pages and is not easy to summarize. Book One traces the history of women's place in society from the bronze age to medieval times to modernity, including an analysis of the "myth of woman" through five authors: Henry de Montherlant, D.H. Lawrence, Paul Claudel, André Breton, and Stendhal. Book Two traces the situation of woman today, from childhood to sexual awakening, marriage to menopause, including portraits of woman as lover, narcissist, and mystic, before ending on a more upbeat note with a chapter on women's independence.

#### Woman as Other

The Second Sex is an attempt to answer the basic question "What is Woman?" – that is, as an archetype or category as opposed to women as individuals. Throughout history, men have differentiated and defined women in reference to

themselves, rather than as beings in their own right. A person is a man, and no more explanation is necessary, while a woman must be described as a person of the female sex. The result, de Beauvoir says, is that woman is "the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is Absolute – she is the Other."

The term "Other," she notes, can be applied to any group in society that is not considered the "main" group. In Western civilization, for instance, white men are the "essential," the "Absolute," while any other kind of person, including women, Blacks, and Jews, have been – whether consciously or unconsciously – put in the Other basket. When a group in society is made inferior in this way, they *become* inferior through lost opportunities and debasement.

Men do not feel that they have to justify themselves on any objective basis, but get their feeling of superiority from not being women. This results in the clichéd, although true, view that a women has to do twice as much to be seen as the equal of a man. Discrimination against women, de Beauvoir writes, is "a miraculous balm for those afflicted with an inferiority complex, and indeed no one is more arrogant toward women, more aggressive or scornful, than the man who is anxious about his virility." Today we are familiar with such a truth, but imagine the affront that it caused in bourgeois France 60 years ago.

De Beauvoir expresses her amazement that although women make up half of the human race, they can still be discriminated against. She observes that in democracies men like to say that they see women as equal (or democracy would be a lie), but their attitudes on many levels tell a different story.

#### Is biology destiny?

De Beauvoir goes back to the earliest conceptions of biology to show how science itself served to reduce the power and potency of the female in favor of the male. In conception, for instance, the passivity of the female was contrasted with the "active principle" of male sperm, which was thought to determine all the characteristics of the newborn. Yet in conception, de Beauvoir notes, neither male or female gamete is superior to the other; rather, they both lose their individuality when the egg is fertilized.

The burden of the continuity of life is still a female one, and given the energy and time required for this the female's possibilities are severely restricted, because "the woman is adapted to the needs of the egg rather than to her own requirements." From puberty to menopause, she is at the mercy of a body changing itself according to reproductive needs, and must put up with a monthly reminder of this. In pregnancy in the early stages, vomiting and loss of appetite "signalize the revolt of the organism against the invading species." Many a woman's maladies do not stem from external threats, but from dealing with her own, often problematic reproductive system. Moreover, the more intense emotionality of women is related to irregularities in secretions in the endocrine system, which have an effect on the nervous system. Many of these traits, de Beauvoir points out, "originate in woman's subordination to the species." In contrast, "the male seems infinitely favoured: his sexual life is not in opposition to his existence as a person, and biologically it runs an even course, without crises and generally without mishap." Though women tend to live longer than men, they are ill more often, and overall are less in control of their bodies - their bodies control them. However, menopause can bring liberation, as a woman is no longer determined or judged according to the childbearing function.

While a woman's biological features are therefore the key to understanding her situation in life, de Beauvoir optimistically says, "I deny that they establish for her a fixed and inevitable destiny." Biology is not reason enough for male/female inequality, nor grounds for woman being cast as "Other," and a female's physicality does not condemn her to remain subordinate. Moreover, while animals can be studied as static organisms, it is much harder to make assessments of *people* as male or female human beings, since our sex does not define us in the way it does other animals. In many physical respects a woman is less rugged than a man, so ostensibly her projects and prospects are more limited, but, drawing on Heidegger, Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, de Beauvoir notes that "the body is not a thing, it is a situation." When

viewed in this way, women's prospects may be different to men's, but no more limited. What is more, many of women's "weaknesses" are such only in the context of male ends. Physical inferiority, for instance, becomes meaningless if there is an absence of violence and wars. If society is different, so the evaluation of physical attributes changes.

#### **Becoming woman**

Book Two contains de Beauvoir's famous comment that "one is not born but rather becomes a woman." In childhood there is no difference between the sexes in terms of what they are capable of. Differentiation begins when boys are told of their superiority and how they need to prepare for the difficult, heroic path ahead. While pride in his sex is pointed out to a boy by adults, the girl's sexual anatomy does not receive the same reverence. Urinating also produces a sexual difference: for the boy it is a game, but for the girl a shameful and inconvenient procedure. Even if a girl has no "penis envy," the presence of an organ that can be seen and grasped helps a boy to identify himself and it becomes a kind of alter ego. For the girl it is the doll that becomes the alter ego. There is really no "maternal instinct," de Beauvoir argues, but through play with the doll the girl ascertains that the care of children falls on the mother, and "thus her vocation is powerfully impressed upon her."

Yet when she becomes mature, a girl realizes that it is no privilege to be the mother, as men control the world. This revelation helps her to understand that a father's life has a "mysterious prestige." When sexual awakening occurs, boys are aggressive and grasping, whereas for the girl it is often a case of fraught "waiting" ("She is waiting Man"). Since time immemorial, Woman has looked to the male for fulfillment and escape, so girls learn that to please they must abdicate their power and independence.

Woman's character, de Beauvoir concludes, is molded by her situation. Women are not socially independent but form part of groups governed and defined by men. Any club or social service they set up is still within the framework of the masculine universe. "Many of the faults for which women are reproached – mediocrity, laziness, frivolity, servility," de Beauvoir points out, "simply express the fact that their horizon is closed."

#### Woman and myth

Since women have rarely seen themselves as protagonists, there are not many female myths like those of Hercules or Prometheus. Women's mythical roles are always secondary; they dream the dreams of Man. Man has created myths around woman and all myths have helped to reiterate that woman is the inessential; he has revolted against the fact that he is born from a woman's womb and will also die. Since birth is tied to death, Woman condemns man to finitude.

Women have also been seen as sorceresses and enchantresses who cast a spell on man. Man both fears and desires Woman. He loves her as she is his, but he fears her as she remains the "Other"; it is this Other whom he wishes to make his. Like man, woman is endowed with spirit and mind, but "she belongs to nature and so appears as a mediatrix between the individual and the cosmos." Christianity spiritualized Woman, assigning to her beauty, warmth, intimacy, and the role of pity and tenderness. She was no longer tangible and her mystery deepened. Woman is man's muse, and also a judge who pronounces on the value of his enterprises. She is a prize to be won, the dream within which all other dreams are enfolded. On the positive side, Woman has always inspired Man to exceed his own limits.

#### Final comments

What would de Beauvoir make of today's gender landscape? Particularly in richer and freer countries, many women feel that *The Second Sex* is outdated, that equality is real, or at least that the gaps in equality are bridgeable, and that girls have futures every bit as bright as boys. However, in countries where misogyny rules, and sexual inequality is written into laws and expressed in custom, de Beauvoir's book remains a potential bombshell, revealing much about the real motives of men.

The book has been criticized for being too anecdotal and

circular, for not being a "proper" work of philosophy, but this in itself can be seen as a subtle attack on the author's gender by right-brained, system-building male philosophers. Indeed, that de Beauvoir is often overlooked as a philosopher only proves her point that it is mostly men who end up writing the history of disciplines – and it is not surprising that they focus first on the contributions of their own sex.

Many of de Beauvoir's assertions have been overtaken by science. The fact is that we are not blank slates in terms of gender, but are born with certain behavioral tendencies whether we are male or female. Conditioning is definitely real, as she pointed out, yet it is not the whole story, and we will only be able to counter the limitations put on women by also understanding the biological differences. The more we know about our bodies and brains, the less biology will be destiny.

If you are female, reading *The Second Sex* will remind you of the progress made for women in the last 60 years. If you are male, it will help you gain a greater understanding of the slightly different universe that woman inhabit, even today.

#### Simone de Beauvoir

De Beauvoir was born in 1908 in Paris. Her father was a legal secretary. Her mother was a devout Catholic and she was sent to a prestigious convent school. In her childhood she was very religious and considered becoming a nun, but at 14 she became an atheist.

Studying philosophy at the Sorbonne, she wrote a thesis on Leibniz. In a national exam that ranked students, she came second only to Jean-Paul Sartre (whom she had already met) and was also the youngest person ever to pass. Her relationship with Sartre influenced her first novel, She Came to Stay, published in 1943.

De Beauvoir taught philosophy at the Lycée Pierre-Corneille in Rouen, where her friend the feminist Collette Audry also taught. In 1947 she was sent by the French government to the United States to give university lectures on contemporary French literature. In the same year she wrote her popular essay on French existentialism, "The Ethics of Ambiguity." She traveled widely and wrote several travel diaries about her journeys through China, Italy, and America, which she visited several times.

De Beauvoir lived not far from Sartre in Paris and penned A Farewell to Sartre, a moving account of his last years. She continued her literary and activist work until her death in 1986.

# 1789 Principles of Morals and Legislation

"Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as determine what we should do."

"The business of government is to promote the happiness of the society, by punishing and rewarding. That part of its business which consists in punishing, is more particularly the subject of penal law. In proportion as an act tends to disturb that happiness ... will be the demand it creates for punishment."

"Pleasures then, and the avoidance of pains, are the ends that the legislator has in view; it behoves him therefore to understand their value."

#### In a nutshell

A just society is most likely to be achieved by using an objective calculus of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain.

#### In a similar vein

John Stuart Mill *On Liberty* (p 202)
Plato *The Republic* (p 232)
John Rawls *A Theory of Justice* (p 242)
Michael Sandel *Justice* (p 260)
Peter Singer *The Life You Can Save* (p 280)

# CHAPTER 7 Jeremy Bentham

Jeremy Bentham had a huge influence on nineteenth-century Britain, yet he only became well known in the 1820s, quite late in life. We associate him with reform causes in the Industrial Revolution – including relief for the poor, a proper sewage system for London, extending the voting franchise, and plans for schools, workhouses, and prisons (the famous Panopticon) – but most of his writings came earlier. *The Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, for instance, was written in 1780, and was to be an overture to a multivolume work (which was never produced) on reform of the penal code and the principle of utility in civil and constitutional law.

Though most people have heard of Bentham's principle of utility, also known as "the greatest happiness for the greatest number," few have read *Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Bentham admits that most of the work is quite dry, but his defense is that "truths that form the basis of political and moral science are not to be discovered but by investigations as severe as mathematical ones." Utility was an almost mathematical principle, he felt, and he wanted to give a sense of its unerring logic, which did not leave much room for artistic flourish. However, the book is still a fascinating text.

As a child John Stuart Mill often spent time at Bentham's home, and was groomed to take over the elder man's utilitarian ideology. Mill's *Utilitarianism* (1863) evolved and refined Bentham's ideas, and is an easier introduction to the subject. The history of philosophy may hold Mill to be of higher import, but it is hard to imagine what Mill would have achieved had not Bentham come before him.

#### A new way of governing

Bentham discusses various principles that had been used to guide lawmakers, and dismisses each in turn. If the principle of utility is right, he argues, it is right all the time. All other guiding principles must be wrong and can only be measured against the yardstick of utility.

One such guiding principle is "asceticism." Although practiced in monasteries, Bentham notes that it has never been put to work as an actual principle for government, and for good reason. The mass of people are self-interested, driven by desires rather than stilling desire. Bentham was no atheist, but was very clear about religion having no place in political life. The task of knowing divine will is deeply subjective, and therefore inevitably flawed. In contrast, by adopting the principle of utility we gain a clear idea of what is good for all, and thus are seeing divine will in action. For what would God want, if not increased happiness for the greatest number?

Another guiding principle is "sympathy and antipathy": people are driven to act or judge based on whether or not they like something. This is an anti-principle, as it is founded in nothing universal (like utility), only personal whim. Bentham says that the principle of "right and wrong," while seeming to have more gravitas, is merely an extension of like and dislike. The policy of a government often amounts to an expression of its members' personal preferences. There is no conception of utility, or what is actually best for the greatest number.

While governments may hide behind a secular "moral sense" as a reason for their actions, this disguises their fundamental irrationality. Criminal justice does not rest on rational utility, or what is best for the criminal and society, but on the moral biases of people about which crimes are considered worst. Bentham notes "that the principle of sympathy and antipathy is most apt to err on the side of severity." When a group hates a certain behavior, it will want to punish the doer excessively, way beyond the actual negative effects of the crime, and such punishments will have knock-on negative consequences. And yet, "the happiness of the individuals, of whom a community is composed, that is their pleasures and their security, is the end and the sole end which the legislator ought to have in view." The balance to be maintained by legislators is allowing for as much freedom as possible while containing any behavior that would lessen the happiness of others (a theme that John Stuart Mill would further in On Liberty).

#### The greatest happiness principle

Bentham notes that even if people claim they do not support the principle of utility, they apply it to their lives: to order their own actions and consider the next action to take, and to judge other people's actions. We are basically machines for seeking happiness, and we judge others on whether they are likely to increase or decrease our own store of happiness. Along with Adam Smith, Bentham saw human beings as essentially selfinterested. What, then, was the proper role of government to his mind?

His purpose in writing the book was to "rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and law" – in other words, to legislate happiness into being. This was perhaps a utopian project, yet he argues that the utility principle is the only one by which the activities of a state can be rationally ordered. This was a radical idea, because Britain's legislative system was based on common law, or precedent. The idea of legislating from scratch with the aim of achieving the goal of the highest benefit of the highest number was never likely to happen in practice, though Bentham's call to "take reason, not custom for your guide" would in time revitalize and shape legal thinking.

In Bentham's grand project, neither history nor other texts could be used as a basis for making laws, since if one text were held as the "authority" on a matter, it could easily be opposed by another text. Only reason alone (specifically, the utility principle) could be the basis for policy and law; indeed, Bentham observed that we would know that the principle was operating in institutions and laws if their purpose was such that people *ought* to like them, even if individually they did not always do so.

In his methodical way, Bentham provides a classification of 12 pains and 14 pleasures, and various degrees of each, such as intensity, duration, and extent, which legislators, or indeed anyone, can use to judge the happiness or unhappiness effect of any given action. Though such an approach can seem a little technical or mechanical, for Bentham it was a vital foundation on which to build a new kind of law that could not be abused by any particular group in society for its own interest. His aim was to "to cut a new road through the wilds of

jurisprudence" – to make laws transparent, not benefiting certain people over others. In a country in which hereditary privileges were enshrined in law this was a significant move, and, not surprisingly, Bentham's ideas took a long time to take hold in Britain, despite their great logic. He became much better known in France, where he was lionized by the revolutionaries and made an honorary citizen of the Republic.

#### Final comments

Bentham was not keen on the idea of "natural rights," but he believed that everyone in society has a right to at least be protected from physical harm, on the basis that wrongful action cancels or reduces an individual's right to happiness.

Bentham's dictum "everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one" was shorthand for the utilitarian principle of justice, and he was ahead of his time in applying this to all sentient beings. He argues in *Principles of Morals and Legislation* that rights should depend not on the ability to reason, but on the ability to suffer. This distinction was a foundation of the modern animal rights movement, notably in the writings of Peter Singer (*Animal Liberation*, 1973). For Singer, a contemporary utilitarian, the test of actions, including what we eat or how we spend our money, is how much pain these acts can help avoid (whether for people or animals) and whether those same acts can increase the store of life and happiness.

Critics of the utilitarian principle say that it goes against intuition or human nature. For instance, psychological studies have shown that we do not act based on calculations of how many people our actions will benefit, but on whether an action gives us a positive emotional response. Such biases may be wired into us from millions of years of social bonding and the desire to protect our own, and it is unlikely that a seemingly dry philosophical principle can overcome that. Indeed, utilitarianism may seem quite an impersonal or calculating way of looking at life and the organization of society, and Bentham himself admitted as much, which is why he preferred the phrase "greatest happiness principle." Yet he was passionate in his belief that it was our best hope for a fair and civilized

society.

On a purely personal level, asking "What would benefit the most people, in the best way, as far as possible into the future?" is surely a good way to approach life and its decisions. Bentham assumed that most people were self-interested, but all religions, and many kinds of moral philosophy, attest to the benefits of cultivating the direct opposite state: thinking of the good of others first is actually the one thing we can count on to deliver our *own* happiness.

#### Jeremy Bentham

Born in 1748 in London, the son and grandson of lawyers, Bentham attended Westminster School before, at 12, going to Oxford University. He then trained for a career in law, but never practiced. Instead, he pursued his own interests, and later in life an inheritance allowed him to keep writing and researching without worry.

Bentham wrote voluminously and his papers are still being transcribed. He corresponded with American founding father James Madison, South American revolutionary Simon Bolivar, political economist Adam Smith, and French revolutionary Mirabeau. He favored making homosexuality a private matter instead of a criminal offense, opposed slavery, supported women's equality and the right to divorce, and was a promoter of open government, writing that "Where there is no publicity [i.e., full disclosure] there is no justice." As part of his drive for criminal reform, he spent many years developing the influential "Panopticon" prison concept, though his National Penitentiary was never built.

In 1797, Bentham campaigned with Patrick Colquhoun against theft from merchant ships and corruption on the Thames in London, which led to the establishment of a river police force. He founded the utilitarian newspaper the Westminster Review in 1823, and three years later helped set up the University of London, which later became University

College, London. Its ethos was openness to all, irrespective of wealth or religious affiliation (in contrast to the universities at Oxford and Cambridge).

James Mill (John Stuart's father) met Bentham around 1808 and spent summers with Bentham and his circle at Forde Abbey, Bentham's country house in Somerset. Bentham died in 1832 and, true to his principles, left his body to science rather than have it buried. His exterior mummified body was dressed and eventually placed on display at University College, London. It can still be viewed today.

Other books include Fragment on Government (1776), Defence of Usury (1787), Panopticon (1787), Parliamentary Reform Catechism (1817), and A Treatise on Judicial Evidence (1825).

## 1907 Creative Evolution

"That adaptation to environment is the necessary condition of evolution we do not question for a moment. It is quite evident that a species would disappear, should it fail to bend to the conditions of existence which are imposed on it. But it is one thing to recognize that outer circumstances are forces evolution must reckon with, another to claim that they are the directing causes of evolution. This latter theory is that of mechanism. It excludes absolutely the hypothesis of an original impetus, I mean an internal push that has carried life, by more and more complex forms, to higher and higher destinies."

#### In a nutshell

We want to see the universe in mechanistic and determined terms, but reality, because it involves life and time, is in fact fluid and constantly open to possibility.

#### In a similar vein

Hannah Arendt *The Human Condition* (p 16)
David Bohm *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (p 62)
Immanuel Kant *Critique of Pure Reason* (p 156)
Arthur Schopenhauer *The World as Will and Representation* (p 274)

# CHAPTER 8 Henri Bergson

Henri Bergson was something of a intellectual star in the first half of the twentieth century because, in contrast to the pessimism and determinist outlook of most philosophers, he emphasized creativity, free will, and joy in existence. His writing style also made a refreshing contrast to the overly academic, dry prose of the likes of Kant and Heidegger, and *Creative Evolution* in particular was widely read. It had been lavishly praised by William James, who urged his friend to publish it in English, and the book delivered Bergson a Nobel Prize for literature (rare for a philosopher).

While not disrespecting scientific logic at all, *Creative Evolution* addresses what Bergson sees as the failings of Darwinism and evolutionary theory. In his mind, Darwinism is a mechanistic theory par excellence, but should not be mistaken for being the whole story of reality. For while evolution focuses on the manifestations of life, Bergson is concerned with the "life force" that generates it. For many this *élan vital* is a slippery (almost mystical) concept, and Bergson's long list of detractors has included Bertrand Russell and Wittgenstein. Certainly, he lies outside the philosophical mainstream, and his emphasis on creativity and living an authentic life was more of an influence on existentialist artists and writers (his preoccupation with time or "duration," for instance, made a big mark on Marcel Proust, who was best man at Bergson's wedding).

Though in the 1940s his books dropped off academic reading lists, there was a revival of interest in Bergson's work, helped by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and his idea of "becomings." And while some of the details of Bergson's discussions have been overtaken by science, *Creative Evolution* still presents some basic and important questions for our time, and forms an interesting alternative to the standard materialist texts of evolutionary biology.

# A reminder of what we can be

At the start of the book, Bergson gives much attention to the human being as something existing in time and space. At first glance, our intellect is perfectly suited to dealing with our physical environment: "our logic is, pre-eminently, the logic of solids," he notes. We naturally see the universe in terms of mechanics and matter, but does this view actually provide us with the truth? We are wont to put everything into categories, to pour life into molds, but "all the molds crack." Bergson's problem with biology is that it sees life as matter to be studied, but should life be viewed in this way? Our notions of individuality and separate organisms are merely convenience: all living things are ultimately part of a whole.

Our intelligence equips us to explain not only the physical universe, but the unseen forces that shape it. If we stick to a purely mechanistic view, our explanations will remain "necessarily artificial and symbolical," Bergson says. What we should be trying to gain a sense of is the "creative impulse" that brings forth and animates life. Moreover, if evolution is seen in terms of a continual thrust of creation, then it makes sense that it enables "as it goes on, not only the forms of life, but the ideas that will enable the intellect to understand it, the terms which will serve to express it." We have evolved to such a high level that we can understand both ourselves and the very forces that power life.

## The constant, unstoppable creation of the new

Bergson notes that we can submit all kinds of inorganic matter to calculation according to the laws of physics and chemistry. We can get an accurate picture of a rock, for instance, by examining it. However, life forms are different in that they are changing from one second to the next. We can examine them well according to their past and their long history of evolution to this point, but we cannot with absolute certainty know what the organism will do next, even for something as simple as an insect, with its very simple neurological structure. Why is this?

The difference with life forms (as opposed to the inanimate) is that they have "duration." They do not simply exist in space, but are of time, and time is a much more challenging concept for analysis than spatial form. While in Descartes' estimation

the world is created anew each moment, Bergson's concept takes account of the force of evolution, which is "a real persistence of the past in the present, a duration which is, as it were, a hyphen, a connecting link." The past is all wrapped up in the present, yet that past does not determine the next moment. To really know a living thing you must see it as part of a sort of energetic flux whose nature is constant creation:

"The more we study the nature of time, the more we shall comprehend that duration means invention, the creation of forms, the continual elaboration of the absolutely new."

Applied to the life of a person, Bergson echoes Hannah Arendt when he writes:

"our personality shoots, grows and ripens without ceasing. Each of its moments is something new added to what was before. We may go further: it is not only something new, but something unforeseeable."

In contrast, artificial or mathematical systems, or facts relating to astronomy, chemistry, or physics, can be analyzed outside of time, because you are simply dealing with objects. A life form, on the other hand, can never be fully pinned down. Of course, once you study a person or a flower or worm, you can work backward to "explain" the organism, but the limits of such analysis should be fully admitted. A mechanistic view of the universe says that events are determined by their causes, yet for Bergson a "cause" is something quite fluid. He reverses the usual understanding of causality by saying that events or products are what matter; it is they that furnish a cause, rather than causes explaining their existence.

This led Bergson to a theory of unforeseeability and absolute originality in nature, but particularly in man. This is hard to stomach for the human mind, he admitted, since we believe in "like producing like" and predictability. However, nature itself surely bore out Bergson's idea: when a child comes into the world, we can expect it to have many of the physical and mental traits of its parents, while intuitively we accept that a child is someone entirely new – and he or she surely is.

By embracing life directly, instead of through some

intellectual construct, "reality appears as a ceaseless upspringing of something new."

# Seeing the whole

Science "is concerned only with the aspect of repetition," Bergson comments. It is driven to make rules based on what has happened before, and to see patterns in nature. In doing this, it examines things in smaller and smaller parts, arriving at "knowledge" of the thing. Nevertheless, something can be known, Bergson suggests, only by knowing it as a whole. Perception of the whole goes against the way science works. It is also the real function of philosophy.

Bergson admits that life *can* be seen as a kind of mechanism, but one in which each organism is part of a larger system, which is itself part of a whole, an "indivisible continuity." He uses the analogy of a curved line on a page. When you zoom in, the line is composed of thousands of dots of ink; when you consider a tiny part of the line, it is not curved at all, but for all intents and purposes is straight. It is only by zooming out that we see the real nature or purpose of the ink as it is aligned: a curve. By the same token, he says, "life is no more made of physico-chemical elements than a curve is composed of straight lines."

Scientists believe that in their work they are effectively taking a snapshot of the universe, and that from this snapshot of the present moment they can make assumptions about the future. With superhuman intelligence and enough data, if we put everything there is to be known about the universe now into a computer, we could predict with accuracy when a new species might take form and what it would be like, or the direction of vapor from a person's mouth on a cold winter's day, or any number of things. However, such a view assumes that time can indeed be frozen for a moment, a delusion on which so much of science is built.

The fact that time doesn't stop, and that the nature of duration is the ever-creating power of living things, means that the future will never be calculable. Rather, as Bergson suggests, we appreciate life in time, or duration, rightly as "a stream against which we cannot go. It is the foundation of our

being, and, as we feel, the very substance of the world in which we live." The "dazzling prospect of a universal mathematic" that analyzes everything into its static components is a folly that goes against experience and the very nature of life.

### No goal in mind

Having said this, Bergson does not believe that there is any final goal or end point toward which life moves ("finalism"). Its thrust is simply to create, and its impulse is toward individuality:

"Nature is more and better than a plan in course of realization. A plan is a term assigned to a labor: it closes the future whose form it indicates. Before the evolution of life, on the contrary, the portals of the future remain wide open."

The mechanistic and finalist views can only be meaningful if they do away with time itself, by which means "everything changes inwardly, and the same concrete reality never recurs." The intellect "dislikes what is fluid, and solidifies everything it touches."

Bergson's conclusion is that the mechanistic and finalistic outlooks are only "external views of our conduct. They extract its intellectuality. But our conduct slips between them and extends much further." We are not mechanisms, we are expressions of the creative life force.

### Final comments

Bergson asks: in the rational, modern world in which we live, what is the place of intuition, or instinct? He notes that the lives of animals are simple because they do not have to think about their actions; they simply act according to their nature. Human intelligence has given us the ability to plan, ponder, and make choices (furnishing us with civilization), yet it has not been without cost. In taking on analytical intelligence, humanity has ceased to live through instinct, and so has lost touch with the essence of life.

Each person still can access the power of intuition, or being and acting before analysis is brought into play, but what prevents this is preoccupation with our immediate needs. This focus on meeting needs (which have no end) means that we are focused on the material world in all its diversity and multiplicity, in contrast to the oneness and simplicity of the life force. Philosophy is one way of reconciling the two, allowing us to live in the body in the "real" world, yet always be drawing ourselves back to life itself. For Bergson, the true philosopher is no dry analyst of concepts, but one who cultivates instinct and intuition in order to be rejoined to the basic fact of our existence: as one among trillions of expressions of an absolute Whole, whose nature is continuous creation and evolution.

# Henri Bergson

Bergson was born to Jewish parents in 1859. He was a gifted student and an able mathematician and in his teenage years won the prestigious "Concours Général" prize. He went on to study humanities, prompting his mathematics teacher to lament that he "could have been a mathematician" but would "be a mere philosopher."

He was accepted to the elite École Normale Supérieure and had Jean Léon Jaurès (later an eminent French statesman) and David Émile Durkheim (the sociologist) as his contemporaries. He was placed second in one of the highest philosophy exams in France, the Agrégation de Philosophie. After university, Bergson taught in a high school in central France. He was accepted into the Collège de France and also went on to teach in his alma mater, the École Normale Supérieure.

Creative Evolution brought Bergson fame and many admirers, including the poet T.S. Eliot. His first visit to the United States resulted in a traffic jam on Broadway. He became one of the planners and executors of the League of Nations, the precursor to the United Nations, and as president of the International Commission for Intellectual Cooperation had an active hand in the formation of UNESCO.

Other books include Matter and Memory (1896), Mind Energy (1919), and Two Sources of Morality and Religion (1932). However, much of his other work has been lost, burned



# 1980

# Wholeness and the Implicate Order

"Thus, the classical idea of the separability of the world into distinct but interacting parts is no longer valid or relevant.

Rather, we have to regard the universe as an undivided and unbroken whole. Division into particles, or into particles and fields, is only a crude abstraction and approximation. Thus, we come to an order that is radically different from that of Galileo and Newton – the order of undivided wholeness."

"So it will be ultimately misleading and indeed wrong to suppose ... that each human being is an independent actuality who interacts with other human beings and with nature. Rather, all these are projections of a single totality."

### In a nutshell

The human way of perceiving separate objects and creating categories is an illusion. Reality is in fact unbroken and undivided, and all phenomena are simply perturbations in this single whole.

### In a similar vein

Henri Bergson *Creative Evolution* (p 56) G.W.F. Hegel *Phenomenology of Spirit* (p 118) Thomas Kuhn *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (p 172) Karl Popper *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (p 238)

# CHAPTER 9 David Bohm

David Bohm was one of the twentieth century's outstanding theoretical physicists, known for the DeBroglie–Bohm theory and the Aranozov–Bohm Effect, both relating the often strange behavior of electrons. The DeBroglie–Bohm theory posits "hidden variables" in quantum physics that display its nonlocal nature (i.e., particles are linked, acting almost like twins, despite vast distances between them). Bohm worked under Robert Oppenheimer (of Los Alamos atomic bomb fame) and collaborated with Albert Einstein. However, in a life bridging East and West, science and metaphysics, he was also greatly influenced by his friendship with Jiddu Krishnamurti, an Indian sage and writer, and by conversations with the Dalai Lama.

Bohm was particularly fascinated by lab results showing that subatomic particles that are far apart can still communicate in a way that could not be explained by physical signals traveling at the speed of light. Such instantaneous (or nonlocal) communication was one of many things that suggested to him that the universe is not empty space containing particles of matter, but rather that space itself is almost alive with intelligence. Space is best understood as one unbroken whole of which consciousness is a part. It is only the human senses that abstract certain phenomena to give the impression that things are separate and autonomous, and that mind and matter are separate. These views went against the deterministic physics establishment, yet science has still to prove Bohm's ideas wrong.

While most physicists are content to burrow away at their specialization, Bohm was vitally concerned about the implications of his ideas. Much of the world's problems, he thought, came from the perception that every person and thing is separate from another, which makes us want to defend ourselves against a perceived "other" and to see humanity as something separate from nature. Such broader thinking turned Bohm into a philosopher, and his work demonstrates how philosophical thinking comes into its own when science fails to

reveal the meaning of research.

Bohm wrote *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* for a general audience, and it makes for compelling reading.

#### A new view of the universe

Bohm points out that the atomic view of the universe seemed like a very good explanation of reality for a long time. However, relativity theory and quantum physics then showed that the base level of reality was not so simple. Actual particles are elusive, to the extent that it is better to understand matter as a form of energy, not as a composite of tiny things. An atom is not so much a thing on its own, but exists more like a "poorly-defined cloud," Bohm says, very much dependent on its environment, including whoever or whatever is observing it. The atom is more like a simplification or abstraction of reality than reality itself. A particle is best seen as a "world tube," he memorably claims, always in motion to the extent that it is a point of energy, not a thing. Each particle/world tube extends through space and has a field around it that merges with other fields.

This view of the universe is not of empty space containing some matter; rather, everything is a unified field and "nowhere is there a break or a division." This is Bohm's notion of "wholeness." His analogy is a pattern on a carpet: it makes no sense to say that the flowers or figures in the design are separate objects – they are obviously part of the carpet.

# The implicate and explicate orders

If the first aspect of Bohm's cosmology is wholeness, the second is his notion of the implicate and explicate orders. The explicate order is essentially everything that we can perceive with our senses, the "real world." In the explicate, things exist in their own area of space (and time), apparently separate to other things. The implicate, in contrast, is outside space and time, and contains the seed of everything that manifests in the real world. It enfolds everything possible. To put it another way, order is enfolded in space and time, and only sometimes will it be expressed in the forms of the explicate order. It is the implicate that is genuinely real and stable; the explicate is a

distinguished suborder of this more primary reality.

Bohm gives the example of a drop of ink that is put into a large container of viscous fluid. When the container is spun at high speed, the ink appears to dissolve into the fluid and it gets murkier; but when the spinning is reversed, the ink retraces its circular motion in the fluid and winds itself back to its original position. Thus the order of its movement is enfolded in the liquid, even if at a later point this order seems to have disappeared. Later in the book, Bohm takes up this example again to note that the ink's path in the fluid is its implicate order, and its visibility part of the explicate. The latter becomes possible because of the interaction of light and our eye, brain, and nervous system.

How does this explanation relate to wholeness? The whole, including space, time, consciousness, and both implicate and explicate orders, is part of what Bohm calls the "holomovement," an "unbroken and undivided totality." But how are we to understand the fact that our analyses of the world into autonomous parts do actually work? "Holonomy," or "the law of the whole," still allows for things in the universe to seem autonomous, even if they really are not. Each apparently separate thing or event is actually just an aspect (patterns on a carpet, eddies in a river), not in fact separate and self-ruling.

### Mind and matter

What is the relationship of thinking, or consciousness, to reality?

To be practical, humans long ago made a big distinction between the fixity, stability, and "reality" of things, and the impermanence and unreality of the thinking realm. This was a distinction of convenience, not of truth. Bohm's "wholeness" view says that if mind and matter both arise from the universal flux, it does not make sense to see "thought" and "reality" as separate. This has important implications for quantum physics and the ethos of an "objective observer" in science. Scientists think that they are standing apart from what they observe, but if you accept reality as one flowing movement, then object, observer, observing instrument, and experimental results must all be seen as part of the same phenomenon.

It is only our individual thoughts arising from the brain and nervous system (call this the ego) that can foster separateness, confusion, and incorrect assumptions. Nevertheless, it is something to be at least aware of this possibility, to be open to what may simply be our own projections and false categorizations, as distinct from the "what is" of the universal whole. This is why, as Eastern philosophy tells us, it is only when we can really observe our thoughts, or in meditation have a moment of "not-thinking," that we can begin to know what really *is*. Your worldview will dictate your relations in the world. If you perceive reality in terms of separate objects, this will be your experience of it. If you perceive reality as one unbroken whole, naturally this will change the way you relate to other forms of life, and to your own consciousness.

# Where intuitive knowledge and creativity come from

Bohm makes a distinction between thought, which is naturally linked to memory, and "intelligent perception," which can be a flash of understanding in which we see that all our thinking had been wrong or "conditioned." These perceptions are genuinely new and seem to come from nowhere. As he notes, the prevailing view is that all perception, however fresh it may seem, arises in neurons and synapses of the brain. However, if perceptions are genuinely fresh and unconditioned, it is not possible that they come from the banks of memory and experience laid down in the brain. They arise from the universal flux of consciousness, which is beyond or greater than any particular arrangement of particles and atoms in the brain.

It is possible to "know" something through perception, without having a basis for knowing it through memory or mechanical thought; we are simply attuned to the universal flux (indeed, we were never *not* a part of it). The same goes for genuine creativity: no one has ever been able to say where an original idea comes from. Creativity is mysterious because it literally does not come from "us," only as the result of our being an abstraction of a greater flow of intelligence. Bohm's analogy is a radio receiver, which, when switched on, will produce a

meaningless buzz on its own. "When thought functions on its own," he writes, "it is mechanical and not intelligent, because it imposes its own generally irrelevant and unsuitable order drawn from memory." It is only when thought is attuned to a frequency – an intelligent order – that it becomes an instrument of order and meaning itself.

#### Final comments

Despite what we know of quantum physics, Bohm notes that scientists continue to have a mechanistic view of the universe. First it was atoms that made up the universe, then electrons, now it is quarks and protons. Though he was writing before the advent of the Large Hadron Collider and the quest to find the Higgs-Boson or "God particle," he would have seen this as part of the same quest to locate the basic building blocks of the universe. But even relativity theory suggested that the existence of a single stable particle was illusory; Einstein preferred to think of the universe in terms of fields. It is only our dogged attachment to finding "things" that has kept us wanting to see the universe as like a container filled with stuff, when space is more like a field pregnant with potential. As Bohm puts it:

"What we call empty space contains an immense background of energy, and ... matter as we know it is a small, 'quantized' wavelike excitation on top of this background, rather like a tiny ripple on a vast sea ... space, which has so much energy, is full rather than empty."

Bohm's idea that the universe is one flowing whole has been called "neutral monism" in philosophy. The supremely rational Bertrand Russell subscribed to it, and wrote that "the whole duality of mind and matter ... is a mistake; there is only one kind of *stuff* out of which the world is made, and this stuff is called mental in one arrangement, physical in the other."

In Bohm's view, can we say that individual people really exist? He writes, "it will be ultimately misleading and indeed wrong to suppose ... that each human being is an independent actuality who interacts with other human beings and with nature. Rather, all these are projections of a single totality." We do exist as separate phenomena, but only before we are

absorbed back into a larger movement. We were never truly separate; we are more like swirls on a carpet or ripples in a stream.

### David Bohm

Born in Pennsylvania in 1917, as a boy Bohm enjoyed tinkering and inventing. His parents were immigrants from Hungary and Lithuania, and his father owned a successful furniture store. He attended Pennsylvania State College, then the University of California at Berkeley, where he worked at the Lawrence Radiation Laboratory and was part of a theoretical physics group headed by Robert Oppenheimer. At this time he was also involved in radical politics, including the Youth Communist league and anticonscription issues.

Oppenheimer wanted Bohm to work in the Los Alamos project developing the atomic bomb, but because of his student politics he was not given security clearance. Instead he taught at Berkeley, where he obtained his PhD, although with some difficulty: his research became classified and he was refused access to it. After the war, Bohm took up a position at Princeton University, working alongside Albert Einstein. However, in 1950 he was called before Senator Joe McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Committee with reference to his previous communist ties, and refused to testify against friends and colleagues. He was arrested and Princeton suspended him; even after his acquittal in 1951 he was unable to regain his position. Bohm was offered a professorship in physics at the University of Sao Paulo, and in 1951 published Quantum Theory, a classic account of the orthodox Copenhagen view of quantum physics.

Bohm moved to Israel in 1955 and there met Sarah Woolfson, whom he married. Two years later he became a research fellow at the University of Bristol, and there with a student discovered the Aharanov–Bohm Effect, which relates to the strange ability of particles to "sense" magnetic fields. In 1961 he took up his final post, as Professor of Theoretical Physics at London's Birkbeck College, where his close collaborator was Basil Hiley. Bohm became a strong promoter

of a form of open discussion to end the world's social problems (known as "Bohm dialogue"). He died in London in 1992.

Other books include Causality and Chance in Modern Physics (1961), The Ending of Time (1985, with Jiddu Krishnamurti), Changing Consciousness (1991), and The Undivided Universe (1993, with Basil Hiley). Lee Nichol's The Essential David Bohm (2002) includes a preface by the Dalai Lama.

# 2002 Understanding Power

"The operational criterion for what counted as a war crime at Nuremberg was a criminal act that the West didn't do: in other words, it was considered a legitimate defense if you could show that the Americans and the British did the same thing ... And this is all stated straight out – like if you read the book by Telford Taylor, the American prosecutor at the trials, this is the way he describes it; he's very positive about the whole thing. If the West had done it, it wasn't a crime; it was only a crime if the Germans had done it and we hadn't."

"Despite what you always hear, U.S. interventionism has nothing to do with resisting the spread of 'Communism,' it's independence we've always been opposed to everywhere—and for quite a good reason. If a country begins to pay attention to its own population, it's not going to be paying adequate attention to the overriding needs of U.S. investors. Well, those are unacceptable priorities, so that government's just going to have to go."

### In a nutshell

In democracies, power silences dissent through the abuse of language.

### In a similar vein

Harry Frankfurt *On Bullshit* (p 110) Niccolò Machiavelli *The Prince* (p 190) Plato *The Republic* (p 232)

# CHAPTER 10 Noam Chomsky

Noam Chomsky is perhaps the most famous contemporary philosopher, but strictly speaking he is a linguist. He made his name with *Syntactic Structures* (1957), which refuted the idea that our minds are a blank slate, instead showing that we are neurologically wired for language (which is why we pick it up so quickly). It is his thinking on politics, power, and the media, though, which puts him at the top of lists of the world's leading intellectuals.

What is an intellectual? Dictionary definitions suggest "a person given to pursuits that require exercise of the intellect," but in a wider social sense it means one who does not blindly go along with society's script, one who questions everything. Chomsky's classic Manufacturing Consent (1988) shattered the myth of an impartial media, showing the press to be very much part of establishment agendas. Understanding Power, which proceeds in question-and-answer format and is based on transcripts from seminars and talks he gave from 1989 to 1999, offers a more comprehensive picture of his thinking. The book's editors, Peter Mitchell and John Schoeffel, note, "What distinguishes [his] political thinking is not any one novel insight or single overarching idea. In fact, Chomsky's political stance is rooted in concepts that have been understood for centuries. Rather, Chomsky's great contribution is his mastery of a huge wealth of factual information, and his uncanny skill at unmasking, in case after case, the workings and deceptions of powerful institutions in today's world." Indeed, the book has a supporting website with hundreds of pages of footnotes and links to real government documents. Counter to his reputation as a conspiracy theorist, Chomsky's aim is always to get people to think for themselves.

Understanding Power is eye-opening. As an indication of how much ground the book covers, the issues summarized below are only from the first part.

# Political language

Chomsky begins with a discussion of how language is used and abused in order to hide unjust actions.

He notes the distinction between the dictionary meaning of words and their meaning as deployed in "ideological warfare." For example, "terrorism" is something that only other people do. Another abused word is "defense." "I have never heard of a state that admits it's carrying out an aggressive act," Chomsky remarks, "they're always engaged in 'defense." The media never question this: for instance, no mainstream publication challenged the idea that the United States was "defending" South Vietnam, when in fact it was attacking it. "Defense" becomes an Orwellian term whose meaning is its exact opposite. "The terms of political discourse," he says, "are designed so as to prevent thought."

Chomsky argues that America's wish to portray itself as supporting democracy around the world is an illusion; in fact, it only supports democracies it *likes*. For example, because under the Sandinistas business did not have a big role in the Nicaraguan state, in US eyes it was not a true democracy, so was ripe for dismantling. He contrasts this with El Salvador and Guatemala, governments that were run by the military for the benefit of the local oligarchies (landowners, rich businessmen, and the professional class) whose interests were tied up with those of the United States:

"It doesn't matter if they blow up the independent press, and kill off the political opposition, and slaughter tens of thousands of people, and never run anything remotely like a free election, all of that is totally irrelevant. They're 'democracies,' because the right people are running them; if the right people aren't running them, then they're not 'democracies.'"

# The real power

Chomsky does not simply criticize government, noting:

"In our society, real power does not happen to lie in the political system, it lies in the private economy: that's where the decisions are made about what's produced, how much is produced, what's consumed, where investment takes place, who has jobs, who controls the resources, and so on and so forth."

As long as this is the case there will be no real democracy,

because capital is in the hands of the few, not the many, and it is money, not political power per se, that is the center of our societies. Today, our economies *are* our societies, so they are run on the basis of "let's keep the rich happy."

Chomsky sees himself as very much part of the classical liberal tradition, which he reminds us was precapitalist, and was focused on "the right of people to control their own work, and the need for free creative work under your own control – for human freedom and creativity." By this reasoning, wage labor under today's capitalism would have been seen as immoral. If you do not control your own work, you are a wage slave.

Economies are never framed in terms of what is best for people who actually work, Chomsky says, but for capital itself. This does not mean that he wants nationalization of industries, as this would simply put power in the hands of a state bureaucracy. Instead, he favors actual worker-owned enterprises and control of capital within a market system. Only when this happens will democracy extend to economic power; until it does, "political power [by the people] is always going to remain a very limited phenomenon."

Chomsky was years ahead of the "Occupy" movement when he noted that "about half the population thinks that the government is just run by 'a few big interests looking out for themselves' ... people either know or can quickly be convinced that they are not involved in policy-making, that policy is being made by powerful interests which don't have much to do with them."

Discussing the environment, Chomsky notes the contradiction between the desire of people to preserve and enhance life, and the profit motive of corporations: "the CEO of General Electric ... his job is to raise profit and market share, not to make sure that the environment survives, or that his workers lead decent lives. And those goals are simply in conflict."

Yet he does see cause for optimism: despite the media's whitewashing of reality and the corporate takeover of politics, people are actually still very skeptical of elites and established commercial and power interests. Disillusionment is not

something of the left, he points out. It can be channeled by any cause or group willing to mobilize, which could include evangelists, environmentalists, and, for more recent examples, the occupiers and the Tea Party movement.

# States of dependence

Despite the rhetoric of extending freedom around the world, Chomsky argues that the real purpose of American foreign policy is to keep as many states as possible dependent on it. Chomsky was saying this over 20 years ago, but the same could be said today of China and its efforts to "buy" countries like Nepal on its periphery, and of many resource-rich African nations. Large powers resist the independence of smaller powers because they may begin paying more attention to the welfare of their own people, instead of instituting policies that serve the big country's interests. US foreign policy is designed to suit US investors, he says, so if any foreign government brings in measures that actually put their people first, "that government's just going to have to go."

While America insists that developing countries open their markets, Chomsky points out that "there is not a single economy in history that developed without extensive state intervention, like high protectionist tariffs and subsidies and so on. In fact, all the things we *prevent* the Third World from doing have been the *prerequisites* for development everywhere else."

### It's all domestic

Chomsky argues that all foreign policy moves are to serve domestic ends. But what are the authorities defending? He gives the example of the Bolsheviks' rise to power in Russia. No one was seriously saying that the Bolsheviks would mount an attack on the United States. Rather, the fear was that Bolshevik ideas would infect US politics. Just after the Russian Revolution, America's Secretary of State Robert Lansing warned President Wilson that the Bolsheviks are "issuing an appeal to the proletariat of all nations, to the illiterate and mentally deficient, who by their very numbers are supposed to take control of all governments." In other words, the elites

envisioned the American people actually thinking for themselves and rising up, when they should be kept in their place. The response was to send troops into Russia and launch the "Red Scare" at home to discredit Bolshevism as un-American.

The "war against terrorism" of more recent times might be seen as another manifestation of this, in which civil freedoms are curtailed in order to fight a (perhaps overplayed) threat.

Chomsky points out the contrast between huge defense budgets and emaciated spending on education and health. The reason for this, he says, is that social spending "increases the danger of democracy." If more money is spent on hospitals and schools, it obviously affects people in their local area and they want to get involved in the decisions; in contrast, money spent on a stealth bomber is uncontroversial because it has no direct effect on people's lives, and the average person knows nothing about military aviation. "And since one of the main purposes of social policy," Chomsky observes, "is to keep the population passive, people with power are going to want to eliminate anything that tends to encourage the population to get involved in planning – because popular involvement threatens the monopoly of power by business, and it also stimulates popular organizations, and mobilizes people, and probably would lead to redistribution of profits, and so on."

The costs of imperialism are paid by the people, in taxes, but the profits from imperialism go to the rich. Therefore, the average person simply does not benefit from imperialist foreign policy, but pays through the nose for it.

### Final comments

It is hard to view politics and the media in the same way after reading Chomsky, yet it would be wrong to consider this book as an attack on the United States alone. The corrupting nature of power is universal, and wherever you live local examples will spring to mind. To understand power is not simply to know what a particular country or corporation or institution has done, but what it will tend to do if it is not checked and exposed. But given his relentless attack on the American state, surely if it were all-powerful Chomsky himself would have been silenced

long ago? His answer is that he is a white male, and white males are seen as sacrosanct in the modern West. To kill one is a big deal, and so would be counterproductive to established interests.

It is often the sign of brilliance when a person tells you how much they do not know, and Chomsky is keen to point out how little science does actually explain the world, particularly when it comes to incredibly complex factors like human action and motivation. Given his dark view of power, he is surprisingly not a pessimist about our future. He does not go along with the sociobiologists who claim that humans are somehow wired for selfishness, instead observing that "if you look at the results of human nature, you see everything: ... you see enormous self-sacrifice, you see tremendous courage, you see integrity, you see destructiveness."

There is always the potential for any gains that have been made to be reversed, but on the whole Chomsky sees progress. It is less acceptable now to treat people as objects or means to an end ("Slavery was considered a fine thing not long ago") and even if power structures only pay lip-service to freedom, self-determination, and human rights, at least these are acknowledged ideals.

# Noam Chomsky

Chomsky was born in Philadelphia in 1928. His father had emigrated from Russia and was an eminent Hebrew scholar. At 10 Chomsky wrote an article on the threat of fascism after the Spanish Civil War, and from 12 or 13 he identified with anarchist politics. He entered the University of Pennsylvania in 1945, coming into contact with Zelig Harris, a prominent linguist. In 1947 he decided to major in linguistics, and 1949 married the linguist Carol Schatz.

From 1951 to 1955 Chomsky was a Junior Fellow at Harvard, where he completed his PhD, later published as The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory. He received a faculty position at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1955 and has been teaching there ever since. In 1965 he organized a citizens' committee to publicize tax refusal in protest over the

war in Vietnam, which brought him to public recognition. Four years later he published his first book on politics, American Power and the New Mandarins (1969).

Other books include The Political Economy of Human Rights (1979, with Edward S. Herman), Deterring Democracy (1991), Powers and Prospects (1996), and Failed States (2006). A film version of Manufacturing Consent was released in 2001.

# 44 BC On Duties

"For what, in the name of heaven, is more to be desired than wisdom? What is more to be prized? What is better for a man, what more worthy of his nature? Those who seek after it are called philosophers; and philosophy is nothing else, if one will translate the word into our idiom, than 'the love of wisdom.' Wisdom ... is 'the knowledge of things human and divine and of the causes by which those things are controlled.' And if the man lives who would belittle the study of philosophy, I quite fail to see what in the world he would see fit to praise."

"While the whole field of philosophy is fertile and productive and no portion of it barren and waste, still no part is richer or more fruitful than that which deals with moral duties; for from these are derived the rules for leading a consistent and moral life."

### In a nutshell

What is right and what is expedient can never be separate things.

### In a similar vein

Confucius Analects (p 80) Immanuel Kant Critique of Pure Reason (p 156) Niccolò Machiavelli The Prince (p 190) Plato The Republic (p 232)

# CHAPTER 11 Cicero

One of the great figures of ancient Rome, Marcus Tullius Cicero's life (106–43 BC) straddled the democratic, noble, more innocent Roman Republic and the rapacious, autocratic Roman Empire. His story is worth repeating in brief.

From a wealthy, but not aristocratic, landowning family south of Rome, Cicero's father was determined that he and his brother Quintus would make a mark in Rome. After a top-flight education, Cicero's first job was as an assistant to high-ranked generals on the battlefield, but he did not care for war and was happy to return to Rome to carve out a career as a barrister. His skill made him one of Rome's rising stars. However, he was also eager to learn Greek philosophy and law. He spent a couple of years traveling in Greece and Asia, where he heard Epicureans such as Zeno and Phaedrus speak.

At 31 Cicero was given his first post as quaestor (financial officer) in Sicily, where his integrity so impressed the local citizens that he was asked to represent Sicily in a successful prosecution against its greedy governor, Verres. At 37 he was given an aedileship, which put him in charge of organizing games and entertainment in Rome, and at 40 he was made a praetor, or senior magistrate. The peak of his career came at 43, when he was made consul (the equivalent of today's prime minister or president) of Rome – a great achievement for a homo novus ("new man") who was not from one of the old senatorial families.

Cicero had come of age in a Rome that still operated through the noble institutions of the Republic, but its purity was becoming muddier by the day because of civil war and the rise of dictators like Julius Caesar. As consul, Cicero saw himself as a defender of the true Rome. This outlook was tested in the first year of his reign by the Cataline conspiracy, in which a disgruntled senator (Lucius Sergius Catilina), barred from being consul due to electoral corruption, conspired to overthrow the government. Cicero got wind of this and declared martial law. He had the conspirators captured and then executed without trial. Cicero painted the event as an

attack on the Republic, and himself as its savior. However, his decisive action would later come back to haunt him, when a senatorial enemy, Publius Clodius, had a law enacted for the prosecution of anyone who had citizens executed without trial.

To avoid trial, Cicero was for a time cast into exile and channeled his energies into writing, retiring to his house at Tusculum, near Rome. In less than two years he produced most of his famous writings, including *Discussions at Tusculum*, *On Friendship*, and *On Duties*.

# A philosophy of duty

On Duties (De Officiis), Cicero's most influential work, is a long, three-part letter addressed to his son Marcus. While Cicero probably intended it to be read widely, the letter format makes it relatively informal.

It is partly a defense of philosophy itself, with Cicero trying to show his son why it should be relevant to him. In a civilization that honored political success above all else, philosophy was considered a little suspect (even "a Greek thing"). This is one reason Cicero plays up his political career and is very modest about his contributions to philosophy. At the same time, he is passionate about conveying the splendor of Greek philosophy to the Roman public; the aim of *On Duties* is to show how philosophy gives a proper foundation to the most practical questions of moral and social obligation. "For who would presume to call himself a philosopher," he asks, "if he did not inculcate any lessons of duty?"

Cicero believed that the universe was run according to a divine plan, and that each human being was a spark or splinter off God. Therefore, treating another person badly was doing the same to ourselves. He observes the absurdity of one who says that they will not rob or cheat a member of their own family, but puts the rest of society in another "basket." This denial of obligations, ties, or common interests to those they don't know well is the ruin of society, he says. Similarly, those who have strong regard for their fellow citizens, but not foreigners, "would destroy the universal brotherhood of mankind" and any sense of kindness or justice along with it. He points to Plato, who said that "we are not born for ourselves

alone, but our country claims a share of our being, and our friends a share." We are social animals, born for the sake of each other. The aim of life is simple, Cicero says:

"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."

When working out our heaviest obligations, Cicero suggests this order: country and parents first; second our children and family, "who look to us alone for support and can have no other protection"; and finally our countrymen, with whom we must live on good terms and are united in common cause.

# What is right and what is expedient

Cicero aims to explode the idea that you must sometimes sacrifice doing what is right for the sake of doing what is expedient. The Stoic view, which he adopted, is that "if anything is morally right, it is expedient, and if anything is not morally right, it is not expedient ... that duty which those same Stoics call 'right' is perfect and absolute and 'satisfies all the numbers."

People who are focused only on profit and getting ahead will routinely make a division between the good action and the expedient action, but Cicero says that they are deluded. Doing what is right, aligned as it is with universal moral law, cannot "leave you out of pocket." Everyone who has tried to cheat another and then found themselves lacking in funds knows the truth of this. If someone says "That is the right course, but this one brings advantage," Cicero observes, "he will not hesitate in his mistaken judgment to divorce two conceptions that Nature has made one." The result is an opening of the door "to all sorts of dishonesty, wrong-doing, and crime." Just as two wrongs can't make a right, no matter how good you are at covering it up, "so what is not morally right cannot be made expedient, for Nature refuses and resists."

He warns that even slight transgressions of natural justice can have big consequences. There are few better examples of this than the politician or business fiddling their expense claims, yet the small amounts gained lead them – when found out – to lose their job and status. Surely, he notes, there is no advantage to be gained that is worth ruining the reputation of a "good man," and moreover that person's sense of themselves as just and honorable: "For what difference does it make whether a man is actually transformed into a beast or whether, keeping the outward appearance of a man, he has the savage nature of a beast within?" These statements are obviously reminiscent of biblical statements such as "What profiteth a man to gain the whole world, but lose his soul?" and made Cicero attractive to the early Christians.

### The Stoic view of life

On Duties makes multiple references to Panaetius, a Greek Stoic philosopher who lived from c. 185 to c. 110 BC and whose work is now lost. Cicero eloquently expresses the Stoic view of life on a range of matters, outlined here.

# The dangers of success

"[W]hen fortune smiles and the stream of life flows according to our wishes, let us diligently avoid all arrogance, haughtiness, and pride. For it is as much a sign of weakness to give way to one's feelings in success as it is in adversity."

# Moderation and self-control

"[E]very action ought to be free from undue haste or carelessness; neither ought we to do anything for which we cannot assign a reasonable motive; for in these words we have practically a definition of duty." "[P]eople should enjoy calm of soul and be free from every sort of passion. As a result strength of character and self-control will shine forth in all their lustre."

"And if we will only bear in mind the superiority and dignity of our nature, we shall realize how wrong it is to abandon ourselves to excess and to live in luxury and voluptuousness, and how right it is to live in thrift, self-denial, simplicity, and sobriety."

# Following your own character and "genius"

"Everybody, however, must resolutely hold fast to his own peculiar gifts ... For we must so act as not to oppose the universal laws of human nature ... and even if other careers should be better and nobler, we may still regulate our own pursuits by the standard of our own nature. For it is of no avail to fight against one's nature or

to aim at what is impossible of attainment ... nothing is proper that 'goes against the grain,' as the saying is – that is, if it is in direct opposition to one's natural genius."

"If there is any such thing as propriety at all, it can be nothing more than uniform consistency in the course of our life as a whole and all its individual actions. And this uniform consistency one could not maintain by copying the personal traits of others and eliminating one's own."

# On the use of power

Cicero notes Plato's statement that "all knowledge that is divorced from justice be called cunning rather than wisdom." Bold actions that are not inspired by the public good "should have the name of effrontery rather than of courage," he says. The paradox is that the more ambitious a person is, the more tempted they are to do anything to achieve their goals or win fame. If they are honorable, the "trials and dangers" they have to go through to win eminence give them an "I deserve it" mentality, and make them want to cling on to power or become vulnerable to accept things that are not theirs.

### Final comments

Cicero is an enigma. On one hand, he is the great defender of the Roman Republic and its ideal of the rule of law; on the other, he sentenced several conspirators to death without trial. Though at the time Rome was operating under martial law, the conspirators were still citizens, and many thought the act unforgivable.

One cannot doubt his influence, though. He was instrumental in bringing Greek philosophy, particularly that of Plato, to the Roman educated classes. His outlook was adapted by Christian philosophers, notably Augustine, whose life was said to have changed after reading Cicero's Hortensius (a work now lost), and his ethics and concept of natural law were foundational to medieval Christian philosophy. Philosophers like Erasmus proclaimed Cicero the archetypal humanist, and Enlightenment thinkers Voltaire and Hume praised his skeptical and tolerant view of the world. Cicero's Republican ideals were a large influence on the Founding Fathers of the United States (John Adams revered

him) and he was even taken up by the French revolutionaries. Friedrich Engels, however, grumbled that Cicero never cared about extending economic or political rights beyond the wealthy class.

Tough and uncompromising in office, you might have expected Cicero to be a hard man who believed in duty at the expense of personal aspiration. In fact, his humanism was a contrast to brutal dictators like Sulla and Caesar, and he took pains to say that people should if at all possible go into a career that is true to their character. This kind of sentiment reveals that Stoic philosophy, despite its reputation for stony dutifulness, was actually focused on the individual and the unique role one could play in the world.

### Cicero

After Caesar's murder, Cicero hoped that the Republic could be reborn and supported Octavian (Augustus) against Marc Antony. When for a time Augustus and Marc Antony agreed to a power-sharing dictatorship under the Second Triumvirate, both sides wanted their enemies eliminated. Cicero's name was added to the death lists and he was hunted down and killed in 43 BC while attempting to leave for Macedonia. On Antony's instructions, Cicero's hands and head were cut off and displayed in the Senate. Antony's wife Fulvia was said to have delighted in pulling Cicero's tongue out of his head and jabbing it with her hairpin.

Cicero's family name comes from the word cicer, "chickpea" in Latin. His brother Quintus Cicero was also made a praetor, and was governor of Asia with Pompey. Cicero had a son and a daughter with Terentia, who came from a wealthy family. He was grief stricken when their daughter Tullia died in her mid-30s.

The British author Robert Harris's books Imperium (2006) and Lustrum (2009) are the first two volumes in a fictionalized trilogy about the life of Cicero, seen through the eyes of his secretary Tiro, a slave whom Cicero made a freedman.

# 5th century BC Analects

"Tsze-chang asked Confucius about perfect virtue. Confucius said, 'To be able to practice five things everywhere under heaven constitutes perfect virtue.' He begged to ask what they were, and was told, 'Gravity, generosity of soul, sincerity, earnestness, and kindness. If you are grave, you will not be treated with disrespect. If you are generous, you will win all. If you are sincere, people will repose trust in you. If you are earnest, you will accomplish much. If you are kind, this will enable you to employ the services of others."

"The Master said of Tsze-ch'an that he had four of the characteristics of a superior man – in his conduct of himself, he was humble; in serving his superior, he was respectful; in nourishing the people, he was kind; in ordering the people, he was just."

"Fan Ch'ih asked about benevolence. The Master said, 'It is to love all men.' He asked about knowledge. The Master said, 'It is to know all men.'"

### In a nutshell

We are born a human, but we become a person through fulfilling a responsible role in society in a selfless way.

### In a similar vein

Cicero On Duties (p 74)

# CHAPTER 12 Confucius

It can be argued that Confucius is the most influential philosopher in history, given the sheer number of people his ideas have had an impact on and how long the ideas have been around. He was running a school to train political leaders fully two centuries before Plato established his academy, and his philosophy of personal virtue and political order, or "all-pervading unity," was one of the good things to come out of the warring states or Spring and Autumn period of Chinese history.

Confucian ethics guided China for hundreds of years, but then during Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution Confucius was declared persona non grata, because his ideas were seen as part of the feudal system that the Communist Party wanted to destroy. In recent times the Chinese state has allowed Confucianism to flourish because it upholds moral virtues, making for a "harmonious society," and provides a valuable alternative to Western-style liberal democracy. Secondary schools now teach Confucian classics and the government funds Confucius Institutes around the world.

Putting great emphasis on family loyalty and public service, Confucian philosophy is largely an ethic of selflessness and fitting in well to one's community. Its "rules of propriety," expressed in age-old institutions and the proper ways of doing things, are in contrast to the changeability of emotion and personal circumstance. As Confucius scholar D.C. Lau has noted, "there is no individual – no 'self' or 'soul' – that remains once the layers of social relations are peeled away. One is one's roles and relationships." Harmony in these relationships is the goal of life, and only when we act properly to our parents, relations, and rulers do we achieve fulfillment. This does not mean everyone has to be the same; room is made for all types in the larger unity, like the different instruments of an orchestra that make one beautiful sound.

"Confucius" is the Latin version of Kongfuzi, and "Analects" simply means a collection of literary extracts, in this case sayings and stories that his disciples put together as a record of the thoughts of the "Master." After his death, Confucius'

band of men spread his teachings across China, each emphasizing a particular aspect of the Master's philosophy that reflected their own defects in virtue.

# Becoming a person

Ren is the central concept in Confucian ethics. It has different meanings in the Analects, one of which is "benevolence," a trait that we have to develop; another way of understanding it is as the process of "becoming a person," a being who has cultivated the full range of virtues. These include reciprocity (shu), respect, and constantly thinking of the good of the whole rather than one's self. Some of Confucius' thoughts on this concept:

"The Master said, 'The superior man thinks of virtue; the small man thinks of comfort. The superior man thinks of the sanctions of law; the small man thinks of favours which he may receive." "The Master said: 'He who acts with a constant view to his own advantage will be much murmured against." "The Master said, 'The mind of the superior man is conversant with righteousness; the mind of the mean man is conversant with gain."

The wise person loves virtue more than anything, and will always do what is right. Virtue is like a bridle that a man needs to keep his ambition and passions in check. Confucius compares truthfulness, for instance, to the crossbar to which one's oxen are tied, which enables the carriage to move forward. Without it, the horses will run wild and cause chaos.

As the following passage suggests, one must be true to one's "self," but the paradox is that however much we analyze this self, peeling away the layers of ignorance, we are not likely to find any great truth of personality. Rather, we simply become a vessel for the expression of qualities that benefit everyone:

"The Master went out, and the other disciples asked, saying, 'What do his words mean?' Tsang said, 'The doctrine of our master is to be true to the principles of our nature and the benevolent exercise of them to others, this and nothing more."

### Qualities of the master

The *Analects* is not just a collection of Confucius' sayings, but is a picture of the man and his qualities drawn by his disciples. One says, "The Master was mild, and yet dignified; majestic, and yet not fierce; respectful, and yet easy." Another notes "four things from which the Master was entirely free. He had no foregone conclusions, no arbitrary predeterminations, no obstinacy, and no egoism."

Though Confucius could often admonish his men, it was without malice and only to act as a mirror to their behavior or outlook. He was still very human (he was for a time inconsolable when one of his favorite disciples died aged only 31), but he was also "beyond personal," with a freedom and clarity of mind of which most only dream. Many passages talk of his composure and of the appropriateness and timeliness of all his actions. "The superior man is satisfied and composed," he is quoted as saying, "the mean man is always full of distress." His method of contrasting two qualities was memorable and even witty:

"The Master said, 'The superior man is affable, but not adulatory; the mean man is adulatory, but not affable." 
"The Master said, 'The superior man has a dignified ease without pride. The mean man has pride without a dignified ease."

His followers were always wanting wisdom from him, but one day Confucius simply said, "I would prefer not speaking." One of them retorted, "If you, Master, do not speak, what shall we, your disciples, have to record?" Confucius replied:

"Does Heaven speak? The four seasons pursue their courses, and all things are continually being produced, but does Heaven say anything?"

# How to get ahead

In Confucius' time, obtaining government office was the ambition of many young men. A disciple, Tsze-chang, asks Confucius the best way to gain a good position. He replies:

"When one gives few occasions for blame in his words, and few occasions for repentance in his conduct, he is in the way to get emolument."

#### He later notes:

"A man should say, I am not concerned that I have no place, I am concerned how I may fit myself for one. I am not concerned that I am not known, I seek to be worthy to be known."

# How to govern with justice and a long-term view

"The Master said, 'He who exercises government by means of his virtue may be compared to the north polar star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn towards it."

As an adviser to governments and a minister himself, Confucius' insight was that it is better to create policies that lead people toward virtue than to enforce tough punishments for anyone who transgresses a law:

"The Master said, 'If the people be led by laws, and uniformity sought to be given them by punishments, they will try to avoid the punishment, but have no sense of shame. If they be led by virtue, and uniformity sought to be given them by the rules of propriety, they will have the sense of shame, and moreover will become good."

He had similarities with another government adviser, albeit a military one, the general-for-hire Sun Tzu (author of *The Art of War*). Both put understanding human nature at the heart of their philosophies.

On how to gain respect as a ruler and avoid corruption, Confucius' recipe was simple. A ruler should "advance the upright" and not promote the crooked, then people will submit naturally because they can see justice in action. If the opposite happens and the crooks are in charge, people will only give lip service to the regime. Confucius outlines other features of a good ruler, such as making sure people are paid well and rewarded, but avoiding excessive spending elsewhere; ensuring that work regimes are not too harsh; and being majestic in person, though not fierce.

Finally, Confucius emphasized patience in building a community or state. Instead of rule by personal whim, one should wish for things to happen at their natural pace. Such a long-term view enables the interests of all to be taken into account, including future generations, and acknowledges the

progress that has been made in particular areas by ancestors and past administrations. In a time of war and upheaval, this vision of long-term peace, prosperity, and justice in the state was highly appealing to governors.

# **Constant learning**

Confucius was a great scholar, editing collections of poetry and historical texts that chronicled his native Lu state, and he also wrote an important commentary on the *I-Ching* (Book of Changes).

He saw book learning as a means of self-perfection and could be impatient with disciples who were not so intellectual. A line in the *Analects* attributed to Tsze-hsia says: "Mechanics have their shops to dwell in, in order to accomplish their works. The superior man learns, in order to reach to the utmost of his principles." Confucius himself put it more simply and powerfully: "Without knowing the force of words, it is impossible to know men."

#### Final comments

Confucius emphasized the value of filial piety, particularly deep respect and loyalty to our parents, and there are several mentions in the *Analects* of the importance of the three-year mourning period after a parent's death. In answer to a disciple's question about the meaning of filial piety, Confucius regrets that it has come to mean mere "support," when a dog and a horse are also capable of support. What is crucial is *reverence*. Revering one's parents refines the self, allowing us to see that we are simply one link in a chain of being that stretches into the past and the future.

Yet Confucius was not yoked to tradition for its own sake. The story is told that he saved and kept in his home a slave boy who had escaped from being entombed with his master, which was the custom of the time. Confucius argued in court that the custom was barbaric, a case of filial piety taken to a horrible extreme, and the boy was saved. His message: duty is important, but it is duty to align oneself always with virtue, not to particular customs or traditions. While these necessarily change, qualities such as respect and honesty are timeless.

#### **Confucius**

Born in 551 BC in what is now the province of Shandong, the details of Confucius' life have been the subject of aggrandizing accounts, but he was likely born in the house of Song, as a descendant of the Shang Dynasty. His father died when he was only 2, and despite his noble background he had an impoverished childhood and adolescence.

He worked in a variety of jobs through his twenties to his forties, but his wisdom gathered followers, and as an official he trained young men for service. He was a successful bureaucrat and at 53 he became the minister for justice in the city of Lu. However, after a falling out with its ruler he was exiled, becoming a freelance political adviser for various rulers. In 485 BC he was allowed to return to Lu and there wrote much of his work, including the Book of Songs and the Book of Documents.

By the end of his life, Confucius was revered by his patrons and his disciples, who were said to number over 3,000. He died in 479 BC.

# 1641 Meditations on First Philosophy

"But immediately afterwards I became aware that, while I decided thus to think that everything was false, it followed necessarily that I who thought must be something; and observing that this truth: I think, therefore I am, was so certain that all the most extravagant assertions of the sceptics were not capable of shaking it, I judged that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking."

"And the whole force of the arguments I have used here to prove the existence of God consists in this, that I recognize that it would not be possible for my nature to be as it is, that is to say, that I should have in me the idea of a God, if God did not really exist."

#### In a nutshell

I can doubt that everything I perceive is real, but the fact that I doubt tells me that I think, that I have consciousness. And if I have this, I must exist.

#### In a similar vein

Immanuel Kant *Critique of Pure Reason* (p 156)
Thomas Kuhn *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (p 172)
Gottfried Leibniz *Theodicy* (p 178)
Baruch Spinoza *Ethics* (p 286)

## CHAPTER 13 René Descartes

René Descartes was a man of the Enlightenment, who made profound contributions not only to philosophy, but also to science and mathematics; he gave us, for instance, the concept of the Cartesian plane and coordinate geometry, and made advances in astronomy and optics. In his time, religion, philosophy, and science were not considered separate domains, and he used the metaphor of a tree to capture the holistic approach that he took to knowledge:

"The roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches emerging from the trunk are all the other sciences, which may be reduced to three principal ones, namely medicine, mechanics and morals."

It was while he was enlisted in the Bavarian army, holed up in a house in the winter, that he had a vision for a new kind of philosophy in which all areas of knowledge could be linked to each other. Living on the proceeds of an inheritance from his father, he left the army, secluded himself in Holland (which had much greater freedom of speech than France or England), and in the ensuing years produced a number of major works of science, scientific method, and philosophy.

Descartes was never a teacher or professor, and his writings were addressed to the intelligent layperson. The *Meditations on First Philosophy* was his attempt to find out exactly what could be known. He wrote:

"Now therefore, my mind is free from all cares, and that I have obtained for myself assured leisure in peaceful solitude, I shall apply myself seriously and freely to the general destruction of all my former opinions."

His radical aim was to "demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable." The work has the power to shock even today, and remains very readable, being both short and personal.

Though Descartes saw himself as a man of science, he was also concerned to provide a rationale for divine involvement in the world. This is the other, often overlooked aspect of the book: its ingenious accommodation of science and religion.

#### Is there anything that we can say is real?

Descartes' first two meditations proceed by his famous "method of doubt." He notes that all information gathered through the senses can be called into question. The obvious example is when we have just had a rich experience, then wake up and realize that it was merely a dream. Or when a square tower appears round from a distance, or perspective plays tricks with our perception. These seem like minor examples, but Descartes raises a more important issue: the physical sciences such as astronomy and medicine rely on observation and measurement by our senses, and therefore can't be trusted. He considers disciplines such as geometry and arithmetic, which do not depend on the existence of anything in the world as such; their very abstractness can make them infallible. After all, two plus two equals four whether I am dreaming or not. On the other hand, since humans frequently make arithmetical errors, we have to doubt the correctness of all our mathematical judgments. So knowledge cannot be claimed in this domain either.

Having pointed out just how uncertain and weak the basis of our knowledge is, Descartes finds something that *can* be depended on. He realizes that in order to be misled over some piece of knowledge, even to be deceived about everything that I consider knowledge, there must be an "I" that is deceived:

"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."

The essence of being human is that we are "thinking things." Though every kind of judgment we make about the world may be flawed (indeed, we cannot even be sure that the physical world exists at all), and though if we may be constantly deceived about what we perceive to be fact, it cannot be doubted that we perceive, that we have consciousness. This

line of thought leads Descartes to his famous conclusion: "I am thinking, therefore I am." In philosophy this is known as the "cogito," from its Latin rendering *cogito*, *ergo sum*. As Descartes puts it:

"I have convinced myself that there is nothing in the world – no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Doesn't it follow that I don't exist? No, surely I must exist if it's me who is convinced of something."

Descartes imagines a "great deceiver" always trying to pull the wool over his eyes in terms of what is real. Yet he reasons that, if he is being deceived, he must exist: "he will never make it the case that I am nothing while I think that I am something."

Descartes' other great insight along this line is that, while he could imagine himself in some strange situation existing without a body, he could not imagine being a body without a mind. Therefore, his essence is his mind or consciousness, and the body is quite secondary.

After arguing that his mind exists, Descartes wants to assure himself of the existence of objects external to the mind. Having doubted everything, he tries to build up a basis of knowledge again. The objects of sensory perception – the things we see, smell, and hear – cannot be part of the mind, he concludes, because they force their effects on us involuntarily. It is not my conscious decision to hear a falling object hit the floor; the sound reaches me regardless. Therefore, the sound cannot originate in my mind, but must be outside it. This encourages him to conclude that external corporeal objects do exist.

In contrast to the imaginary deceiver who tries to make him doubt everything, Descartes notes that, in his benevolence, God – who has given us our bodies and our senses – is not a deceiver. God would not make it seem that the sensory data originated from external objects when in fact it did not. For modern philosophers this assumption is shaky. For instance, a person prone to schizophrenic delusions might think that they hear a voice talking to them, when in fact it is all in their mind. Still, Descartes' identification of consciousness as the essence of being human, separating us from our bodies, was a philosophical masterstroke.

The risk was that his journey to discover exactly what we could know would lead him to a nihilistic conclusion, though in fact it seemed to deliver a rock of certainty, providing humanity with confidence in our universe. The "dualism" between mind and body allowed for modern science to flourish, because there was a clear gap between the observer (us) and the observed (the world), which includes our own bodies and other animals. Privileged with a reasoning and observing mind, humankind is justified in dominating nature and creating things that can aim to be an expression of perfection. Our consciousness is a smaller version of God's all-seeing, all-knowing nature.

#### The purpose of doubt and proofs of God

Descartes considers doubt itself, and notes that it is particularly human. Depending on your point of view, we are either afflicted or blessed by doubt, but knowing is clearly better than doubting, therefore to know is a greater "perfection" than to doubt. Given how much we doubt things, therefore, humans must be imperfect. Moreover, imperfect beings cannot produce perfection, either for themselves or for others; there must be something else that is perfect in the first place, which made them and which generates the idea of perfection. Descartes reasons that if he had created himself he would be perfect, but he isn't, so he must have been created by something else. This is obviously God; therefore, he concludes, God must exist.

For Descartes, the thought of God is not simply a crazy idea of humans, but was the most important thought that the creator made sure we would have. Through this thought we would be able to see that we are not perfect, but come from perfection. Indeed, Descartes says, the thought of God is the "Maker's mark" on us.

Not only omnipotent, Descartes' God is benevolent, waiting for humans to reason their way to the truth of divine existence and helping us along in this process, almost expecting that we would come to a point where we doubted everything (not only God, but that the world itself exists). However, God also expects us to reason our way back to some essential truths.

He does not lead us up a blind alley. The divine nature is not merely to tell us everything through faith or through reason alone. We have to experiment, ask questions, find out for ourselves.

Descartes came to believe that nonbelief in God would be perverse, yet he also promoted the idea of keeping separate religion and science, which are, if you like, symbolic of mind and matter. Ultimately, all humankind's achievements in science, art, and reason are our way of getting back to ultimate truths, and matter was simply one expression of such truth.

#### Final comments

Contemporary philosophers like to gloss over or deprecate Descartes' metaphysical side, seeing it as the blemish on an otherwise brilliant conception of the world. Textbooks tend to "forgive" his desire to provide proofs of God, pointing out that this most rational of men could not escape the religious nature of his times. Surely, if he were alive today, he would not even dip his feet into such metaphysical murkiness?

Let's not forget that Descartes' "tree of knowledge" has metaphysics as its very trunk, from which everything else spreads out. His thinking on consciousness, the separation of mind and matter, and his love of natural science are simply branches. Science and a skeptical outlook would do nothing to dismantle divine reality.

However, Descartes was also a supreme rationalist who helped to dismantle the medieval idea that objects were invested with "spirits." His duality between mind and matter dispensed with such superstitions, allowing for the rise of the empirical sciences while at the same time not disowning the notion that the universe was the creation of an intelligent mind. Indeed, Descartes' brilliant balancing act between mind and matter, physics and metaphysics was a remarkable echo of Aquinas, whose writings he had studied in his youth. His dualistic system was also a huge influence on subsequent rationalist philosophers such as Spinoza and Leibniz.

#### René Descartes

Descartes was born in 1596 in La Haye, France, which was later renamed Descartes in his honor. He received an excellent education at a Jesuit college that taught Aristotelian logic, metaphysics, ethics, and physics, within the embrace of Thomist (as in Aquinas) theology. He studied law at the University of Poitiers, then at 22 went traveling around Europe, working as a military engineer. It was while in the service of the Duke of Bavaria that he had his famous philosophical visions. For the rest of his life he lived quietly, and not much is known about his personal life. In his fifties he was invited to Sweden to be the philosophy tutor of Queen Christina, but the work was more taxing than his normal solitary regime and he died there of pneumonia in 1650.

Descartes' first work was the Treatise of the World, but he decided not to publish it because it contained the heresy that the earth revolved around the sun, and he did not want to get into the same trouble as Galileo. Other books include Discourse in Method (1637), Principles of Philosophy (1644), and Passions of the Soul, published after his death.

## 1860 Fate

"But if there be irresistible dictation, this dictation understands itself. If we must accept Fate, we are not less compelled to affirm liberty, the significance of the individual, the grandeur of duty, the power of character."

"History is the action and reaction of these two, — Nature and Thought; — two boys pushing each other on the curb-stone of the pavement. Everything is pusher or pushed: and matter and mind are in perpetual tilt and balance, so. Whilst the man is weak, the earth takes him up. He plants his brain and affections. By and by he will take up the earth, and have his gardens and vineyards in the beautiful order and productiveness of his thought. Every solid in the universe is ready to become fluid on the approach of the mind, and the power to flux it is the measure of the mind."

"A breath of will blows eternally through the universe of souls in the direction of the Right and Necessary."

#### In a nutshell

The case for us being simply products of fate is strong, yet paradoxically it is only in accepting it that we can realize our creative power.

#### In a similar vein

Henri Bergson Creative Evolution (p 56) Sam Harris *Free Will* (p 114) Baruch Spinoza *Ethics* (p 286)

## CHAPTER 14 Ralph Waldo Emerson

When not quite 40, the great American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote "Self-Reliance." This acclaimed essay became symbolic of the ethic of American individualism, but it was more complex than generally appreciated. Though he promoted personal responsibility and the duty always to be oneself in the face of social conformity, Emerson's deeper message was that the wish to succeed is not about exerting our will against the world, but in fact working with the grain of the universe.

Almost 20 years later, his essay "Fate" was an attempt to solve this issue of how much we are the result of our own efforts, or the product of unseen forces. It is still a superb meditation on this basic philosophical question.

#### The case for fate

Emerson begins by admitting that the "irresistible dictation" of life is true: fate is real. And yet, he also affirms the "significance of the individual" and the "power of character" as real forces. How does one reconcile these apparent opposites?

At a personal level, most of us feel that our individuality strikes a balance with the world, that we somehow bridge a gap between necessity and liberty, and that though there be "irresistible dictation, this dictation understands itself." Our lives are essentially the working out of our wills within the spirit and limitations of the age in which we live. "The riddle of the age," Emerson says, "has for each a private solution."

Emerson admits the perception of superficiality in the outlook of the typical American, noting that great nations have not been "boasters and buffoons, but perceivers of the terror of life, and have manned themselves to face it." He mentions the Spartans who happily ran to their deaths in battle, and Turkish, Arab, and Persian peoples who did the same, easily accepting their "preordained fate." Even the old Calvinists, he notes, had a similar dignity, according to which their individuality meant

little against the "weight of the Universe." Emerson implies that it is hubris to believe that our little selves can have any real effect, when, as Chaucer put it, destiny is the "ministergeneral" that actually decides the course of war and peace, hate and love.

What is more, Emerson writes, nature is not sentimental, "will not mind drowning a man or woman," and will swallow a whole ship "like a grain of dust." Races of animals feed on each other, volcanoes explode, a change in the seabed swamps a town, cholera overcomes a city. Will "providence" save us from any of these things? Even if providence exists, it moves on tracks indiscernible to us and is not a force on which we can count at a personal level; it is pure vanity, he says, to "dress up that terrific benefactor in a clean shirt and white neckcloth of a student in divinity."

Nature is not only no sentimentalist, its forms are tyrannical. Just as a bird's existence is determined by the shape and length of its bill and the extent of its feathers, so humans' gender, race, climate, and talents mold their possibilities: "Every spirit makes its house; but afterwards the house confines the spirit." Our DNA and family heritage create our destiny:

"Men are what their mothers made them. You may as well ask a loom which weaves huckaback, why it does not make cashmere, as expect poetry from this engineer, or a chemical discovery from that jobber. Ask the digger in the ditch to explain Newton's laws: the fine organs of his brain have been pinched by overwork and squalid poverty from father to son, for a hundred years ... So he has but one future, and that is already predetermined in his lobes ... All the privilege and all the legislation of the world cannot meddle or help to make a poet or a prince of him."

Emerson was well versed in Eastern spiritual literature, particularly the concepts of karma, reincarnation, and the "wheel of life," which all point to nature and the circumstances of our present lives being largely the result of actions and experiences in previous incarnations. Yet in the Western tradition he finds support for this outlook, noting German philosopher Friedrich Schelling's remark that "there is in every man a certain feeling, that he has been what he is from all eternity, and by no means became such in time." Everyone is

"party to his present estate." If this is true, what gives us the temerity to see ourselves as blank slates?

Looking back over scientific history, it often seems inevitable that a certain discovery emerged at a particular time. We like to ascribe inventions and insights to an individual, but usually there were two, three, or four people who came to the same conclusions simultaneously. The truth is that progress is impersonal and has its own momentum. Particular people are interchangeable "vehicles," and to think otherwise provokes laughter from the gods.

The weight of fate will, however, seem different to different people. A brutish person, Emerson suggests, will find themselves hemmed in on all sides by an equally brutal destiny, whereas a finer person will seem to experience finer checks on their actions. Yet while our limitations, or our fate, become less heavy the purer our soul, "the ring of necessity is always perched at the top."

#### The case for personal power

Having put the strongest argument for the weight of fate, Emerson suddenly changes tack. Fate, he begins to say, is itself subject to limitation. For there is another force that moves the world, which he calls "power." If fate is "natural history," power is its nemesis, and humankind is not "ignominious baggage" but a "stupendous antagonism" that throws a spanner into the works of an apparently determined history.

Part of fate, Emerson says, is human freedom, and "So far as man thinks, he is free." To dwell on fate is not wholesome, and among the weak and lazy it becomes easy to blame everything on it. The right way to see fate is to invoke its natural might without lessening our own liberty to act. It can inspire us to steadfastness when otherwise we might be blown about by the winds of emotion or circumstance:

"A man ought to compare advantageously with a river, an oak, or a mountain. He shall have not less the flow, the expansion, and the resistance of these."

As others believe in fate as a force for harm, we should see it as a force for good, knowing ourselves to be "guarded by the

cherubim of destiny." Having spoken at length of the unexpected wrath of nature, Emerson suggests that we can "confront fate with fate," for "if the Universe have these savage accidents, our atoms are as savage in resistance." Moreover, we have a creative power that frees us, so that we become not a cog in the machine, but a participant in the universe's unfolding, having epiphanies as to how it operates and yet still finding niches to fill with our own originality. For as we expand to knowledge of the unity of things, it is natural that our value to the world increases; we can state "what is" as much as what seems to be written in the book of fate:

"Thought dissolves the material universe, by carrying the mind up into a sphere where all is plastic."

Emerson further observes, "Always one man more than another represents the will of Divine Providence to the period." And with that perception of truth "is joined the desire that it shall prevail." Though the power of nature is significant, a fired-up human will is awesome, potentially galvanizing whole nations or sparking new religions. The hero acts in a way that seems quite oblivious to fate, not even considering that the world could be otherwise.

When you look closely, Emerson suggests, fate is simply causes that we have not completely explained. After all, death from typhoid seemed like "the whim of God" until someone worked out that correct drainage helped to eliminate it; it was the same with scurvy, which killed countless sailors before we realized that it could be stopped by a store of lime juice. Great land masses were intractable until rail tracks were laid. Human ingenuity frequently makes a mockery of seemingly all-powerful "fate."

#### Emerson's conclusion

At the end of his essay, Emerson comes back to the relationship between people and events. He suggests that "the soul contains the event that shall befall it, for the event is only the actualization of its thoughts ... The event is the print of your form. It fits you like your skin." He goes on to say:

"A man's fortunes are the fruit of his character ... his growth is

declared in his ambition, his companions, and his performance. He looks like a piece of luck, but is a piece of causation."

He likens history to two boys pushing at each other on the pavement. Human beings are either pushed or pushing. One who is weak is pushed by circumstances, while the wise and strong see that apparently immovable objects can be moved, that we can stamp our thoughts on the world. He asks:

"What is the city in which we sit here, but an aggregate of incongruous materials, which have obeyed the will of some man? The granite was reluctant, but his hands were stronger, and it came."

#### Final comments

What is the relationship between Emerson's earlier essay, "Self-reliance," and "Fate"? It would be tempting to say that the later work reflects a wiser Emerson who was more attuned to the power of nature and circumstance in people's lives. It is almost as if he is challenging himself to believe his earlier, more forthright essay on the power of the individual.

Yet while it is true that "Self-Reliance" has the certainty of a younger man and "Fate" is more nuanced, the later essay in fact affirms Emerson's basic position on the relationship between person and universe. In the very last part, he talks of something called the "Beautiful Necessity," the greater intelligence or "law of life" that seems to move the universe. This force drives nature and is beyond words. It is neither impersonal nor personal. The wise person sees that there is nothing left to chance, "no contingencies" – everything turns out how it was meant to. But having noted this apparent determinism, and just when one thinks Emerson has finally sided with fate, he says that this beautiful necessity (nature, God, law, intelligence) "solicits the pure in heart to draw on all its omnipotence."

This, finally, is the opening we are given. Although the law of life is unstoppable and has its own reasons, at the same time it wants us to work with it. In doing so we may lose our little selves, but in the process become attuned to something infinitely larger and more powerful. We cease to be simply a subject, and are a powerful co-creator in the world's unfolding.

#### Ralph Waldo Emerson

Born in 1803 in Boston, Emerson was one of eight children; his father died just before he was 8. He enrolled at Harvard University at age 14, graduating four years later. After some time as a schoolteacher, he attended divinity college at Harvard, became a Unitarian pastor, and married, but his wife Ellen died of tuberculosis. After resigning his post because of theological disputes, he traveled to Europe and met Thomas Carlyle, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Wordsworth.

Returning to America in 1835, Emerson settled in Concord and married again, to Lydia Jackson, who bore him five children. In 1836 he published Nature, which set out transcendentalist principles; his transcendentalist friends included Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Amos Bronson Alcott, and Elizabeth Peabody. In the following two years Emerson delivered controversial addresses at Harvard, the first on American intellectual independence from Europe, the second pleading for independence of belief above all creeds and churches.

In 1841 and 1844, two series of essays were published, including Self-Reliance, Spiritual Laws, The Over-Soul, Compensation and Experience, and, in the decade 1850–60, Representative Men, English Traits, and The Conduct of Life. Emerson died in 1882.

### 3rd century BC Letters

"We must, therefore, pursue the things that make for happiness, seeing that when happiness is present, we have everything; but when it is absent, we do everything to possess it."

"Death, therefore – the most dreadful of evils – is nothing to us, since while we exist, death is not present, and whenever death is present, we do not exist."

#### In a nutshell

We can achieve tranquility and happiness by letting go of irrational beliefs and fears and living simply.

#### In a similar vein

Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* (p 22)
David Hume *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (p 136)

Bertrand Russell *The Conquest of Happiness* (p 254)

However, Epicurus also says that we cannot go on breaking matter down to smaller and smaller parts, otherwise we would reach nonexistence. His other interesting cosmological point is that the universe may have many causes; it is irrational to suggest that there is only a single "story" that explains everything. Rather, rational inquiry is likely to uncover many causes for phenomena. He remarks:

"whenever we admit one explanation but reject another that agrees equally well with the evidence, it is clear that we fall short in every way of true scientific inquiry and resort instead to myth."

#### The real sources of happiness

Scientifically, Epicurus seems ahead of his time, but how does his thinking about the universe relate to his views on how to live? His statement "For our life has no need of foolishness and idle opinion, but of an existence free from confusion" can apply equally to science and personal life. In short, happiness is being free from illusions.

All of our choices, Epicurus says in his letter to Menoeceus, should be toward "the health of the body or the calm of the soul, since this is the goal of a happy life." It is natural and good that our actions are in avoidance of pain and fear, and toward pleasure. However, this does not mean that we should merely indulge in any pleasure at any time. The rational person weighs up in their mind the difficulty that may accompany some pleasures, and also knows that some pains are better than some pleasures, because they lead to a greater pleasure at the end:

"Every pleasure, therefore, because of its natural relationship to us, is good, but not every pleasure is to be chosen."

Discussing food, he remarks that we should be happy with simple fare, not a "luxurious table." If we have the latter every day, we will fear its being taken away from us. In contrast, we will enjoy gourmet foods more if we have them only occasionally.

Epicurus admits that linking pleasure to happiness lays his philosophy open to being seen as reveling in sensuality. His aim is in fact more serious: "freedom from bodily pain and mental anguish." It is not food, drinking, and sex that create a pleasant life, but thinking through all of one's choices, so that we will not do or think things that result in a troubled soul. A virtuous life, for Epicurus, is the same thing as a pleasant life, because doing the right thing naturally puts our mind at rest. Instead of having anguish about the consequences of our bad actions, we are liberated to enjoy a simple life of friends, philosophy, nature, and small comforts.

Epicurus further notes that we should not put our trust in chance or luck, only in prudence, which provides stability. The wise person "thinks that it is preferable to remain prudent and suffer ill fortune than to enjoy good luck while acting foolishly. It is better in human actions that the sound decision fail than that the rash decision turn out well due to luck."

Act in the ways above, Epicurus tells Menoeceus, and "You shall be disturbed neither waking nor sleeping, and you shall live as a god among men."

#### Final comments

Epicurus did not deny that there were gods, but he also said that they were unconcerned with the trivialities of human lives, and therefore the idea of gods who might want to punish us had to be wrong. Epicurean philosophy seeks to steer people away from irrational fears and superstitions, and to show that happiness is much more likely if one uses reason to make choices. Presaging William James's pragmatic philosophy by 2,000 years, it suggests that if those choices make us happy and allow us to be at peace, then we will know that reason is the best guide to life. The good person is both free from trouble themselves ("not constrained by either anger or by favour," as Epicurus puts it in the *Principle Doctrines*) and does not cause trouble for anyone else. And in another fragment that has come down to us, he counsels:

"It is better for you to be free of fear and lying on a bed of straw than to own a couch of gold and lavish table and yet have no peace of mind."

One source of peace of mind was human connection; fittingly for someone who promoted friendship as life's greatest

pleasure, Diogenes Laertius reports that Epicurus had more friends than virtually anyone else of his time.

#### **Epicurus**

Born on the Greek island of Samos in 341 BC, Epicurus received an education in philosophy from Pamphilus, a Platonist. At 18 he went to Athens to fulfill his military service, then went to live with his parents, who had moved to Colophon on the Asiatic coast. There another teacher, Nausiphanes, taught Epicurus the ideas of Democritus, including "undisturbedness" as the aim of life.

In 306 BC Epicurus launched a philosophy school in Athens, and the movement that grew up around it became known as the "Garden." Unusually, its students included women and slaves. Epicurus survived on contributions from members, who sought to live according to his dictum "Live unseen," or live quietly without attracting attention. Epicurean communes in ancient Greece and Rome copied the original Garden.

Epicurus' philosophy spread quickly during his lifetime and endured after his death in 270 BC. In Rome, Lucretius helped keep him popular, and Cicero also acknowledged him in his writings. By the Early Middle Ages, Christianity had created a caricature of Epicurus as a gross sensualist, but in the sixteenth century Erasmus and Montaigne, among others, saw him in a new light – as a sensible and rational figure compared to the superstitions and excesses of the Catholic Church. Pierre Gassendi's Eight Books on the Life and Manners of Epicurus (1647) gave him further credibility.

There are many good translations of Epicurus. The quotes given here are from Eugene O'Connor's.

# 1966 The Order of Things

"Historians want to write histories of biology in the eighteenth century; but they do not realize that biology did not exist then, and that the pattern of knowledge that has been familiar to us for a hundred and fifty years is not valid for a previous period. And that, if biology was unknown, there was a very simple reason for it: that life itself did not exist. All that existed was living beings, which were viewed through a grid of knowledge constituted by natural history."

"The sciences are well-made languages."

#### In a nutshell

Every age has unconscious assumptions about how the world is ordered, making the flavor of knowledge quite different from one era to another.

#### In a similar vein

Thomas Kuhn *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (p 172) Karl Popper *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (p 238)

## CHAPTER 16 Michel Foucault

Les Mots et les choses was the book that made Michel Foucault a famous intellectual in France. Subtitled "an archaeology of the human sciences," it attempts to show how knowledge is a cultural product, with different disciplines simply being expressions of the prevailing worldview. When the book was published as *The Order of Things* in America in 1971, literary critic George Steiner wrote:

"an honest first reading produces an almost intolerable sense of verbosity, arrogance and obscure platitude. Page after page could be the rhetoric of a somewhat weary sybil indulging in free association. Recourse to the French text shows that this is not a matter of awkward translation."

The book is indeed very hard to grasp in places, not so much due to the content but to Foucault's style, which takes a page to express an idea that really requires only a line or a paragraph. Luckily, his foreword to the English translation provides a key to the work.

Foucault's basic idea is that each era, or "episteme," is redolent with a "positive unconscious," a way of seeing the world of which it is quite unaware. Our linear minds are used to taking a particular discipline, such as biology or economics, and viewing it as one evolving area of knowledge from its earliest conceptions up to the present day. However, this does not reflect reality. The way people saw the science of life (biology) in the seventeenth century, Foucault says, has more in common with the way they saw wealth and money in that era than it has with biology in the nineteenth century. Each episteme is culturally contained and does not "lead" into another episteme.

#### **Constructing categories**

The idea of the book came to Foucault when he was reading a Borges novel and laughed out loud at a reference to a Chinese encyclopedia dividing animals into:

This new episteme also allowed for the realm of "pure literature," evoked by Mallarmé when he answered Nietzsche's question "Who is speaking?" with the answer "Language itself." Literature is neither resemblance nor representation, but becomes a force of its own. Writing on *Don Quixote*, Foucault says:

"in it language breaks off its old kinship with things and enters into that lonely sovereignty from which it will reappear, in its separated state, only as literature; because it marks the point where resemblance enters an age which is, from the point of view of resemblance, one of madness and imagination."

If you are to write any kind of history that involves opinions, beliefs, prejudices, and superstitions, Foucault says, "what is written on these subjects is always of less value as evidence than are the words themselves." To find out what people really thought in any given era, it is not the content of what they said but how they said it, and making what assumptions, that gives us insights. We think of the sciences as having an objective reality, but Foucault describes them as being simply "well-made languages."

#### Creating modernity: The "birth of man"

In the development of the modern way of thinking, even more important than language is the figure of "man" itself as an epistemological concept. "Man" did not exist during the classical age (or before), Foucault says. This is not because there was no idea of human beings as a species or of human nature as a psychological, moral, or political notion. Rather, "there was no epistemological consciousness of man as such."

Modernity, however, brought us from the horizontal taxonomy of things to vertical conceptual categorization – abstraction. With this came man as a concept, just as the "science of life" (essentially a taxonomy of living things) gave way to the more abstract and conceptual science of biology. Yet Foucault argues that "man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end." By this he means that if our current worldview were to crumble, our current exalted picture of ourselves would also, in time, be seen to be severely limited.

#### Final comments

Foucault's notion of epistemes is not that different to Thomas Kuhn's "paradigms" of scientific thinking, and it is interesting that Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* was published only four years before *The Order of Things* — perhaps evidence that knowledge comes in the form of particular world-views of which the individual is barely aware. Both books are an antidote to the conceit of current knowledge and the belief in a linear model of knowledge accumulation. In reality, whatever constitutes the ground of knowledge in any field is wont suddenly to open up and swallow everything, with new forms of "knowing" springing up in a completely different place.

It is in the nature of modern French philosophy that many assertions are made without being backed up, and *The Order of Things* is no different. Yet the book is valuable in its "meta" approach to knowledge and its questioning of assumptions and biases. Of his own work Foucault writes, "It would hardly behove me, of all people, to claim that my discourse is independent of conditions and rules of which I am very largely unaware." Indeed, just as we now ridicule the Chinese taxonomy mentioned by Borges, it is likely that people in 100 years' time will laugh at the strange categories and blind associations that we currently call knowledge.

#### Michel Foucault

Foucault was born in Poitiers, France in 1926. His doctor father wanted him to study medicine, but at school he was more interested in literature and history. He left Poitiers in 1945 to study at the Lycée Henri-IV in Paris, and was admitted to the École Normale Supérieure a year later. Though an excellent student, he was socially awkward, and struggled with his homosexuality. During this time he became friends with Louis Althusser (a Marxist philosopher). Foucault eventually received degrees in philosophy, psychology, and psychiatry.

In 1950 he became an assistant lecturer at the University of Lille. After a time he left France to teach at the University of Uppsala in Sweden, followed by directorships of the French Institutes at Warsaw University and the University of Hamburg. He began to take an interest in history, particularly the changing views of psychiatric practice, which resulted in the very well-received Madness and Civilization. In 1963 he published Birth of the Clinic.

When his partner Daniel Defert was posted to Tunisia for military service, in 1965 Foucault moved to a position at the University of Tunis. After The Order of Things was published to great acclaim in 1966, he was hailed as one of the great thinkers of his time, along with Jacques Lacan, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Roland Barthes. The same year he published The Archaeology of Knowledge and took up the post of head of philosophy at the University of Clermont-Ferrand. In 1970, he was elected Professor of the History of Systems of Thought at the Collège de France. His increasing political involvement and interest in social action were reflected in 1975's Discipline and Punish, which examines the "technologies" of organization and control.

The first volume of The History of Sexuality came out in 1976. Foucault's reputation grew in the 1970s and 1980s and he lectured throughout the world, spending more time at American institutions. He also made two tours of Iran, writing essays on the Iranian revolution for an Italian newspaper. He died in Paris in 1984.

## 2005 On Bullshit

"One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit. Everyone knows this. Each of us contributes his share. But we tend to take the situation for granted. Most people are rather confident of their ability to recognize bullshit and to avoid being taken in by it. So the phenomena has not aroused much deliberate concern, nor attracted much sustained inquiry. In consequence, we have no clear understanding of what bullshit is, why there is so much of it, or what functions it serves."

#### In a nutshell

Bullshit pervades our culture and we need to know how it is different from lying.

#### In a similar vein

Noam Chomsky *Understanding Power* (p 68)

Michel de Montaigne *Essays* (p 208)

Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* (p 300)

# CHAPTER 17 Harry Frankfurt

In 2005, this little book of only 67 pages became a surprise bestseller. It seemed to tap into public concern about the "spin" surrounding America and Britain's launch of the second Iraq War, but its message has resonated beyond particular events.

Bullshit surrounds us, says Harry Frankfurt, a Princeton moral philosophy professor, but we don't see it for what it is. This is why we need a theory of it.

#### Why it is different to lying

Frankfurt asks whether bullshit is simply the same as "humbug." In his book *The Prevalence of Humbug* (1985), Max Black defined humbug as "deceptive misrepresentation, short of lying, especially by pretentious word or deed, of somebody's own thoughts, feelings, and attitudes."

Bullshit is similar to humbug in that it is an attempt to deliberately mislead, and yet stops short of an outright lie. Bullshit can also be pretentious, and a conscious misrepresentation of the way one really sees a situation. Both humbug and bullshit therefore aim to create an impression that I am thinking or believing something, even if I have not come out and actually said it. In this gap, therefore, a mistruth can arise without my actually stating a lie. Humbug's main aim is not to create a different kind of reality through changing the "facts," but rather for the speaker to be seen differently. A grand political speech, for instance, does not aim to say how the world actually is; its purpose is to make the speaker sound like a patriot, or a spiritual person, or a protector of morals.

Frankfurt concludes that humbug does not fully grasp the real nature of bullshit. To explain why, he begins by quoting Longfellow: "In the elder days of art/ Builders wrought with greatest care/ Each minute and unseen part,/ For the Gods are everywhere." An old-school craftsman was not out to make an impression, but rather its opposite: to make sure that something was done right, even if no one noticed the detail of the work. In contrast, shoddily made items are bullshit,

consistent with human nature. Bullshitting, however, particularly when it extends beyond individuals to organizations and governments, is perverse, a corruption of humanity. Rejection of the "authority of truth" in favor of selling or telling a story can lead to the rise of Hitlers and Pol Pots, whose spin on history is so captivating that it attracts millions of followers.

Bullshit matters, and in turning it into a theory Frankfurt has made a valuable contribution to philosophy. Of course, others have written about the subject in other ways; Sartre gave us the concept of "authenticity," for instance, but it was buried in a long, difficult book. If more philosophers used common terms and wrote very succinct books such as this one, their impact on the average person would surely increase.

#### Harry G. Frankfurt

Born in 1929, Frankfurt received his PhD from Johns Hopkins University in 1954. He taught at Yale and Rockefeller Universities before taking up his position at Princeton, where he remained a professor of moral philosophy until 2002. His areas of academic interest have included Cartesian rationality and truth, the free will—determinism issue (particularly its implications for moral responsibility), and caring and love. Other books include The Importance of What We Care About (1988), The Reasons of Love (2004), On Truth (2006), and Taking Ourselves Seriously and Getting It Right (2006). On Bullshit was originally published in the literary journal Raritan in 1986.

## 2012 Free Will

"Free will is an illusion. Our wills are simply not of our own making. Thoughts and intentions emerge from background causes of which we are not aware, and over which we exert no conscious control. We do not have the freedom we think we have."

"What I will do next and why remains at bottom a mystery, one that is fully determined by the laws of nature and the prior state of the universe."

#### In a nutshell

Our actions are the result of our brain states at any moment, which are in turn subject to prior causes. It is useless to blame people for what they are.

#### In a similar vein

Julian Baggini *The Ego Trick* (p 32) Ralph Waldo Emerson *Fate* (p 92) David Hume *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (p 136)

Friedrich Nietzsche *Beyond Good and Evil* (p 220) Baruch Spinoza *Ethics* (p 286)

## CHAPTER 18 Sam Harris

Sam Harris begins this short (100-page) book with an account of a horrific crime. In 2007, in a quiet American town, two men entered a house before dawn and, finding an adult male asleep, bludgeoned him with a baseball bat. They went upstairs to his wife and daughters, who were still sleeping. After the daughters were bound to the beds, one of the men drove the mother to the bank, where she withdrew \$15,000 and handed it over. Back at the house, the men divided up the money, and raped the older daughter. Hearing the father stir, they doused the house in gasoline and lit it. The father escaped alive, but the girls and her mother died of smoke inhalation. When the police later asked one of the men why he had not untied the others before starting the fire, he replied, "It didn't cross my mind."

Harris's point in telling the story? Our reaction of horror at what the men did is based on the assumption that they had a choice not to, but went ahead anyway. It is this callous intentionality that matters to us (we don't really care that one of the men was raped repeatedly as a child, or that the other recently attempted suicide from remorse). Though Harris finds their behavior sickening, he also admits that if he were forced to trade places with one of them, he would be that man: "There would be no part of me that could see the world differently." With the same genes, life history, brain, and even "soul," we would have done what that man did, in that moment.

Free will was always an important topic in philosophy, but it has become a hot one in recent times because of findings in neuroscience. Harris cites tests showing that the decision to do something (lift an arm, move a chair) is made in the brain some time before "we" consciously become aware of it. Therefore, our neurology is almost set up to make us believe the illusion that we are acting freely. In reality though, he argues, our actions and thoughts are the direct result of our neurological wiring and brain states.

If we are what we are, we cannot be otherwise

There are so many processes in our brain that we have no control over, any more than we control our heartbeat or our breathing. We don't "decide the next thought we think" – thinking just happens. Decisions don't arise from consciousness, they *appear* in consciousness.

However, if so much of our conscious thinking and action is the result of our physical and emotional heritage, how can we ever hold people truly responsible for their actions? Harris says that his thinking does not absolve people of crimes — you obviously have to treat a man who murders a child differently than one who kills one by accident in his car. Nevertheless, to say that a rapist or murderer could have behaved differently is also to say that they were free to resist their impulses, but given that their brain states are the subject of prior causes of which they were subjectively unaware, how could they have acted differently? And if this is so, how can we "blame" them?

Yet if we are indeed mere instruments of our biology, how can we have moral responsibility, and what does this do to our criminal justice system? Even if free will is illusory, it is still clear that our actions have beneficial or harmful effects. In terms of criminal justice, the emphasis therefore must shift from punishment to risk assessment. Some people do need to be locked up if they are a threat to others, Harris says, yet the traditional moral finger pointing associated with crime becomes no longer valid.

#### Where do our choices come from?

Harris argues that we do not determine our wants, they are "given by the cosmos" in ways that we cannot fathom. Perhaps you feel thirsty and you drink a glass of water, but not a glass of juice. Why not juice? It did not occur to you, any more than it occurred to the man to untie his victims from the bed before the fire started.

Harris is keen to point out that there *is* a difference between volitional and nonvolitional states of mind, which are governed by different systems of the brain. Therefore, consciousness is real enough. But the fact that we have a state of conscious deliberation does not mean that we are free willed, because "We do not know what we intend to do until the intention

arises."

The traditional libertarian view imagines that "human agency must magically rise above the plane of physical causation" and that our conscious intentions show that we have free will. True, says Harris, intentions do tell us a great deal about a person, but the origin of intentions is totally mysterious.

Harris's controversial point is that our "attribution of agency" (the reason we give for having done something) is always in error. We make up reasons after the fact to give order to our minds, but the truth is that we do not know why we are how we are. "We do whatever it is we do, and it is meaningless to assert that we could have done otherwise." Or, put a different way: "You can do what you decide to do, but you cannot decide what you will decide to do."

#### Final comments

The idea that free will is an illusion has had plenty of support in philosophy. Schopenhauer dismissed free will out of hand, and Plotinus said, centuries before, "All our ideas will be determined by a chain of previous causes." In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche wrote, "I shall never tire of emphasising a small, terse fact, namely, that a thought comes when 'it' wishes, and not when 'I' wish." The idea of a self-willing ego is a myth, Nietzsche thought; it is more accurate to speak of things that "one" does, meaning a complex of sensation, emotion, and thinking.

Harris sees the idea of free will as the outgrowth of religion, its main purpose to provide psychological relief. But he does ask, late in the book: Won't awareness of the illusion of free will diminish the quality of our lives? This is a subjective question and he can only speak from his own experience, saying that it has only increased his compassion for others, and lessened his sense of entitlement or pride, since his achievements cannot really be called "his," but rather are the result of his lucky upbringing, genes, and the time and place in which he lives. Awareness of the illusion of free will has not made him more fatalistic but in fact has increased his sense of freedom, because his hopes, fears, and so on are not seen in such a personal, indelible way.

## CHAPTER 19 G.W.F. Hegel

The Phenomenology of Spirit is legendarily impenetrable, and those who have buckled down to read it and attest to its power can still be forgiven for making an imaginary plea to Georg Hegel: "I sort of get what you are saying, but why did you have to make it so hard?" As Hegel scholar Frederick Beiser notes, Hegel's books are "often a trying and exhausting experience, the intellectual equivalent of chewing gravel."

Beiser also comments that our age seems to have lost Hegel's "taste for the Absolute," and after world wars, the Holocaust, and numerous other evils, Hegel's faith in progress seems horribly naïve. On a more mundane level, in the specialized, atomized, pluralistic world in which we live now, notions of "wholeness" and "unity" (two of Hegel's favorites) do not seem to make much sense either.

Yet the sheer scale of Hegel's vision can still enthrall and his views may not be as much at odds with contemporary life as at first appears. That we now put Hegel into a dusty box marked "nineteenth-century German idealism" prevents us from seeing his brilliance as an explainer and supporter of modernity. Going against the Romantic view that technology, freedom, and capitalism were inimical to the soul, Hegel said that in fact the modern world is our greatest achievement – the opportunity for which humankind had long waited, a great expression of "Spirit" or consciousness that could not be held back. The role of the individual in all of this is slightly problematic, but, as we will see, Hegel's solution is positive.

The Phenomenology of Spirit is indeed hard to read, but it would be a shame to miss out completely on its insights. Though the book is impossible to summarize, the following should give some taste of Hegel's views.

#### The grand overview

As Hegel notes in the famous Preface, conventional philosophers see their subject as a field of competing positions in which only one system can be said to "win." They view

matters from the perspective of a battlefield of ideologies. Hegel's rather original approach, on the other hand, is to take a bird's-eye view of everything: he sees competing philosophies as each having their place, over time allowing for "the progressive unfolding of truth." Putting this in botanical terms, he observes that the buds are forgotten when they burst forth into blossom, and the blossoms in turn give way to fruit, which reveals the truth or purpose of the tree. Hegel's aim is to free philosophy from its one-sidedness and to show the truth of the whole. It is better to see the variety and richness of culture and philosophy as one great movement.

The book's title can also be translated as "Phenomenology of Mind," and as such it is not about some mystical "spirit," but rather consciousness itself. Phenomenology is the study of things being made manifest or appearing, so in literal terms the title means how consciousness manifests itself in the real world. Every person is the result of thousands of years of development, and Hegel's goal is to say where we have reached as a species. For him, "science" is not simply the study of natural phenomena, but the development of consciousness over time. "History" becomes the process of an ever greater consciousness of ourselves. The whole manifested universe is simply a process of Spirit extending out and then returning to itself in one movement. To properly understand Hegel's project we can also refer back to its working title, which might have made things clearer for readers: "Science of the Experience of Consciousness."

#### A larger view of science

In opposition to every empiricist or materialist philosopher before and after him, Hegel thought that it was mad to consider that the project of knowledge should be confined to natural and physical phenomena. Rather, by looking fully into the phenomenal world we would eventually grasp the inner truth behind it, gaining knowledge of the Absolute. Those who felt that humanity should stop at the material world, or that this was the only world there was, Hegel saw as either lacking courage or being lazy. Full understanding had to take in everything, whether material or not. This was the work of real,

"capital S" Science.

Hegel's "Notion" (Begriff) means the essential nature of something, not only the obvious manifestations. He writes:

"True thoughts and scientific insight are only to be won through the labour of the Notion. Only the Notion can produce the universality of knowledge which is neither common vagueness nor the inadequacy of ordinary common sense, but a fully developed, perfected cognition."

In other words, to be truly scientific, you must go beyond the purely physical and identify the unseen logic of something, or the truth of how matters are unfolding. He admits that this view of science is never going to be well received, and indeed one can see why the later analytical philosophers such as A.J. Ayer and Bertrand Russell gave Hegel short shrift.

As a post-Enlightenment thinker, Hegel had to talk in "scientific" terms, but it is a science that Stephen Hawking would not recognize. And yet, Hegel observed that natural science is seductive, because if we simply look at what is in front of us, no detail seems to be omitted. It therefore gives a sense that we are seeing everything. But this is in fact a poor and abstract kind of knowledge, because it provides information or data, but no understanding. Furthermore, "objective" analysis is an illusion, because things only exist in the context of the observer's perception of them. Object and subject are therefore bound up together: the object, the observer, and the act of seeing are all one. Seeing things in this way makes a mockery of "scientific fact," and tells us that consciousness is as much a part of science as the world of objects it purports to analyze. This, for Hegel, is the more realistic way of apprehending the world.

In his lectures on *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Heidegger drew attention to Hegel's distinction between "absolute" and "relative" reality. Relative knowledge is simply knowledge of things in their relation to other things. Absolute knowledge is of a reality that exists of its own accord, not needing to have a relation to anything else. According to Hegel, science is about discerning absolute reality through our consciousness. This obviously turns on its head the usual definition of science, which is to examine and make sense of the world of actual

things. But Hegel says that the world of relative phenomena is the trees, when what we must do is see the wood, or the nonphysical reality behind everything. The true scientist is willing to look at everything (both relative and absolute knowledge) to get at the truth. And luckily, our consciousness has equipped us to do this. Hegel called philosophy *the* science, because it enabled consciousness of absolute knowledge, which comes before all other kinds of knowledge. As he puts it in his Preface, his aim is to bring philosophy from being mere *love of* knowing to being *actual* knowing.

For Hegel, the real story of science is not our "discovery of the universe," but rather the discovery of our own minds, of consciousness itself. Science, history, and philosophy are really just ways of saying how our consciousness has awakened over time. The trajectory of science is to break down everything into smaller and smaller pieces and categories, and once this is done to put it all back together again, returning to an understanding of the whole.

#### The individual in Hegel's worldview

What is the implication of recognizing that the unfolding of the world is the unfolding of consciousness (Spirit)? One realizes, Hegel says, that one's contribution must necessarily be very small in relation to such a great movement. We must obviously make ourselves achieve what we can, but we can also be sure that the world does not turn on us.

Perhaps surprisingly for such a big-picture thinker, Hegel offers a recipe for personal happiness. A person becomes happy when they see that their individuality is illusory, that the experience of having a body is merely a temporary "agreement ... with thinghood." When we come to see that belief in our singularity is a dead end, while appreciation of our unity with everything else is truth, this cannot make us anything other than happy. Suffering is little more than being caught up in our own little world and believing in its reality. However, awareness that we are merely an expression or agent of Spirit in its unity takes us beyond the happiness/unhappiness dichotomy to truth.

Within a culture or nation, Hegel says, people have an

obvious individuality and can express it thanks to the "might" of a nation. It gives them a proper context. But in more universal, abstract terms, what seems like ours alone is in fact "the skill and customary practice of all." What we seem to do for ourselves results in the satisfaction of others' needs and the development of the society as a whole (the "individual in his individual work ... unconsciously performs a universal work"). Yet in playing our part in something larger, our individuality is also fully expressed. Showing his political conservatism, Hegel notes that the wisest people of antiquity knew that "wisdom and virtue consist in living in accordance with the customs of one nation."

A person naturally seeks their own ends, taking and enjoying things with forceful abandon, grabbing "hold of life much as a ripe fruit is plucked," without thinking of abstract notions of happiness, and even less about laws or customs. Earth is merely a playground for the pleasurable fulfillment of desires. However, we eventually discover that living for ourselves alone does not provide total satisfaction; this end is set aside for an awareness that one is "only a moment, or a *universal.*"

This transition in self-consciousness, from a simple awareness of self as a bundle of desires ("being-for-self") to appreciation that one is part of a larger universality or consciousness ("being-in-itself") or at the very least a community of others, is not always a positive experience, because we see ourselves as simply part of necessity. We have lost something (the feeling of individuality) and there does not appear to be anything to replace it. A person can be "smashed to pieces" on the "uncomprehended power of universality." Yet personal consciousness is not in fact dead, but merely ascended to a new level of consciousness, in which one's self is understood to be part of necessity or the working out of universal law. From being an object in the universe, we become part of that universe's operation, or a "heart which ... has within it a law," which is more open to seeing the welfare of humankind.

The pleasures that we once enjoyed give way to the stupendous realization that giving up our particularity was what

in Eastern Europe, this book's argument that historical development was reaching its conclusion with a global transition to liberal democracy was largely inspired by Hegel. Its many critics damned its idea that history has direction, a notion that many events since (ethnic wars, 9/11, a deep recession) would seem to disprove. And yet, in the wake of more recent popular uprisings against totalitarian regimes, Hegel's suggestion that freedom inevitably seeks expression, and does so through the institutions of modernity (technology, art, liberal democracy), does make sense.

The Phenomenology of Spirit reminds us that consciousness (of ourselves, of political life, of history) is usually positive. Indeed, the book was written as Napoleon's forces were smashing up the old imperial system in Germany, which gave Hegel a rather scary and close-at-hand example of his own theories. He wrote:

"Spirit has broken with the world it has hitherto inhabited and imagined, and is of a mind to submerge it in the past, and in the labour of its own transformation. Spirit is indeed never at rest but always engaged in moving forward."

As consciousness (manifested in people, institutions, customs, and laws) grows, it destroys or transforms what it has made, making way for replacements that display ever greater self-awareness. Of course there are apparent reversals in this flow of events, but the overall pattern is clear.

### G.W.F. Hegel

Born Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in 1770, the son of a minor civil servant, Hegel's intellectual abilities led him to the University of Tübingen. There he met Friedrich von Schelling, later an idealist philosopher, and Friedrich Hölderlin, subsequently a celebrated poet. After university Hegel worked as a private tutor in Berne and Frankfurt, and then as a freelance lecturer at the University of Jena. As he completed Phenomenology of Spirit, Napoleon's troops entered Jena and

the university was shut down. Without a job, he became the editor of a newspaper in Bamburg, and then for many years (1808–15) was headmaster of a secondary school in Nürnberg. During this time he published the three volumes of Science of Logic and wrote his Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences.

In Nürnberg he married and started a family (a daughter died not long after birth, but the couple had two sons), and then in 1816 resumed his academic career with a professorship at Heidelberg University. He moved to the University of Berlin in 1818, where he died in 1831. After his death Hegel's followers separated into right and left factions, Karl Marx becoming a leading exponent of the latter.

Hegel's first book was The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy (1801). Science of Logic (1812 and 1816) was the sequel to the Phenomenology of Spirit. Philosophy of Right, containing his political philosophy, was published in 1821, and Philosophy of History after his death in 1831.

### 1927 Being and Time

"Why are there beings at all instead of nothing? That is the question ... Of course it is not the first question in the chronological sense ... And yet ... we are each touched once, maybe even every now and then, by the concealed power of this question, without properly grasping what is happening to us. In great despair, for example, when all weight tends to dwindle away from things and the sense of things grows dark, the question looms."

"We have defined the idea of existence as an ability-to-be, as one which is in each case mine, is free either for authenticity or for inauthenticity or for a mode in which neither of these has been differentiated."

### In a nutshell

Human existence is a mystery, and the authentic person is one who reflects on that mystery and yet lives in the real world, making the most of their possibilities.

### In a similar vein

Hannah Arendt *The Human Condition* (p 16)
René Descartes *Meditations on First Philosophy* (p 86)
Immanuel Kant *Critique of Pure Reason* (p 156)
Søren Kierkegaard *Fear and Trembling* (p 162)
Jean-Paul Sartre *Being and Nothingness* (p 266)

# CHAPTER 20 Martin Heidegger

Martin Heidegger is often seen as the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century, and his forensic approach to apparently obvious questions or topics continues to have a big impact on contemporary philosophy. Sein und Zeit is his signature work, but it was famously preceded by a 12-year "period of silence" and seemed to come from nowhere. In fact, Heidegger had been lecturing to rapt audiences for years, building up an underground fame among German students as a truly original thinker. As Hannah Arendt (once his student) famously noted, "There was hardly more than a name, but the name travelled all over Germany like the rumour of a hidden king."

Being and Time was published to assist Heidegger's application for the chair of philosophy at Freiberg University, and was planned as the first part of a much larger work. With the book came international acclaim, and he rose to be Freiburg's Rector, replacing his mentor Edmund Husserl. Yet the position showed up Heidegger's naïve (or just plain dark, depending on your point of view) understanding of politics, for he became a public supporter of the Nazi party. After the humiliations of the First World War, he (along with many) wanted Germany to be great again, but whether he was truly anti-Semitic remains an open question. He had a campus affair with the Jewish Arendt, and she remained a loyal supporter throughout his life. However you see the controversy, that Heidegger's philosophy became caught up in his politics was, as it happens, a demonstration of his view that humans can never be divorced from their social environment, no matter how individuated they seem.

Notoriously difficult to understand, the best way to tackle Being and Time is to read around it with one of the many excellent commentaries. If you read it cold, you might find it a quicksand-like experience.

### Being and personhood

At the start of Being and Time, Heidegger notes that the

question of "being" had certainly been addressed by ancient and medieval philosophers, but that no one had explored it properly. It was almost taken for granted, because everyone "is" and therefore we know what it is to "be." Yet in terms of philosophical analysis, he writes, "the meaning of being is shrouded in darkness."

Commentators have struggled with Heidegger's answer to the question, as he wrapped it up in a variety of German terms that do not translate easily into English. The most important of these is *Dasein*, which in its literal translation is "being there," but which Heidegger took to mean a unit of self-reflective consciousness, of which a person is the most obvious example. His big question was: What is personhood? What is it like to be a human being in the world, bounded by space and time?

For him, philosophy's preoccupation with whether the external world exists and questions of what we can really know were a waste of time. What matters is "being-in-the-world," or the fact that we exist in a world rich in meaning and possibility. While previous philosophers had seen the self as an observing consciousness, Heidegger's placement of the self *in* the world led him on a completely different path, influenced by his study of medieval Christian theology. Whereas for Descartes the motto for the self was "I think," Heidegger's was "I care" – not the conventional meaning of emotional sympathy, but more like searching, exploring, making, dealing with, building something; that is, my place among others in a social or political sense (which includes concern for others) and my own development or unfolding.

For Heidegger there are three modes of seeing the world: *Umsicht*, "looking around"; *Rücksicht*, "considerateness" for other beings; and *Durchsichtigkeit*, "looking through" into our own selves. Each is fundamentally different and goes beyond the simple Cartesian duality of "mind" and "matter." Through such distinctions we begin to see why Heidegger felt there was much more to "being" than meets the eye.

### Thrown into the world

Heidegger was a student of, and later assistant to, the founder

along the way coming to conclusions about what is real or true, separate from public opinion. Paradoxically, it is only in admitting that we are very much part of the world that we can shrewdly see the points where we can make a difference. Only humans can help *form* a world, as well as simply existing in it.

### Angst and resoluteness

The feeling of anxiety, Heidegger observes, is a natural result of the not-being-at-homeness that humans experience in the world. Yet angst is also part and parcel of an authentic life, because the nature of authenticity is not that we nullify or reduce this sense of isolation, but that we recognize it as a fact and carry on regardless. In fact, it is a sign of *in*authenticity when a person is fully at one with life and feels totally at home, because it suggests that they are not fully aware of their existence as being contingent and utterly mysterious. Greatness lies in questioning the mystery of our being, and yet taking that uncertainty (with all its fears) and choosing to do something with life in any case.

"Conscience" in Heidegger's terminology is not something moral, but is there to remind us continually to keep on the path of self-examination and original action. "Resoluteness" is the decision not to be subsumed by the "They" or the "One" of public mores and opinion, but to be clear about the unique role that we may play in relation to the world and to others.

### Beings in time

For Heidegger, the crucial point about being is that it is played out within time. The nature of being human is our future orientation. Therefore, to be a being in time is the feeling of always moving toward something; the nature of being human is a future orientation. While we are creatures of the past and we dwell on the past, the true nature of man is to look ahead. We are our possibilities.

Heidegger rejected the idea that philosophy must be based on only what can be perceived by the senses, or on logic alone. He totally rejects the Schopenhauerian idea that the world is merely a projection of our minds. We clearly do exist in the world, and it is impossible for us to exist without our being having meaning in relation to the world: I love, I act, I have an impact – this is the nature of my being, and the sense of it becomes apparent across a lifetime.

#### Final comments

Heidegger was a big influence on Sartre and other existentialists, though he denied that he was himself one, saying that his focus was not man and his existence, but rather Being itself, of which man was the most advanced articulation. The general scholarly view is that Heidegger's exploration of Being was not designed to be useful for living. *Being and Time* is not a self-help book. However, it is difficult not to receive some inspiration from it.

Common sense would seem to bear out his distinction between authentic and inauthentic modes of being. At one level we demand that a person is social, accepts the mores of the time, and plays a part in political life. On the other, we accept that an authentic life is one where the person seizes what possibilities they have and makes something out of them. Indeed, despite its clinical style, running through *Being and Time* is a vein of passion about human possibility and the privilege of being. It is possible to forge a strong self in time, overcoming the perplexity at being thrown into existence.

### Martin Heidegger

Heidegger was born in 1889 in the small southwestern German town of Messkirch, into a conservative Catholic household. At 14 he entered a seminary with a view to the priesthood, but left to pursue studies in literature, philosophy, and science. At 18 he had an epiphany reading a dissertation by the philosopher Brentano on "the manifold sense of being in Aristotle." This led him in turn to Husserl's writings. In his twenties he had articles published in Catholic journals and he received his philosophy PhD in 1913. His habilitation (postdoctoral thesis) on the medieval philosopher Duns Scotus was completed two years later.

In 1918, Heidegger became a Privatdozent at Freiburg University and assistant to Husserl. In 1923 he was made an

assistant professor at the University of Marburg, and in 1928 he gained a professorship at Freiburg University. A strong German nationalist, he was attracted to the strident "national socialism" of the Nazi party. As Rector at Freiburg he went along with Nazi guidelines to reorganize the university, which involved discrimination against Jewish students. Yet in "de-Nazification" hearings after the war, Hannah Arendt helped him form a defense that he had been a naïve believer in national socialism and had not foreseen what the Nazis would do in power. The two remained in contact until Heidegger died, in 1976.

# 6th century AD Fragments

"It is one and the same thing to be living or dead, awake or asleep, young or old. The former aspect in each case becomes the latter, and the latter the former."

"Human nature has no set purpose, but the divine has."

"A man is found foolish by a god, as a child by a man."

"[W]holes and not wholes, convergent divergent, consonant dissonant, from all things one and from one thing all."

#### In a nutshell

Everything changes all the time, yet there is a hidden harmony to the universe.

### In a similar vein

David Bohm *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (p 62) Plato *The Republic* (p 232)

### CHAPTER 21 Heraclitus

One of the great philosophers before Socrates and Plato, Heraclitus was the eldest son of the leading family of Ephesus, one of the main cities of the ancient Greek world and famous for its temple of Artemis.

We do not know a huge amount about Heraclitus, except that he avoided involvement in politics, was something of a loner, and, at a time when it was normal for philosophers to communicate their ideas in speech, he focused on the written word. As a result, his thoughts survived him and his book of sayings became famous in the ancient world. Plato and others discussed him, but his influence was greatest among the Stoics.

The *Fragments* are a collection of sayings and statements covering the nature of the physical universe, ethics, and politics, but it is Heraclitus' metaphysical ideas that have retained their power.

### The Logos

The book begins with this statement:

"Although this Logos is eternally valid, yet men are unable to understand it – not only before hearing it, but even after they have heard it for the first time ... though all things come to pass in accordance with this Logos, men seem to be quite without any experience of it ... My own method is to distinguish each thing according to its nature, and to specify how it behaves; other men, on the contrary, are as forgetful and heedless in their waking moments of what is going on around and within them as they are during sleep."

What does Heraclitus mean by "Logos"? The literal Greek translation is "word" and it is sometimes rendered as "account." He is saying that what follows in the book is an account of something timeless and truthful: an unseen force, not that different from the biblical "Word" or the "Tao" in Taoism, which regulates and runs the universe.

Humans can only act in a right way if their actions are in

absolute reality that awaits our appreciation.

#### Final comments

Heraclitus' statement that "all things come to pass through the compulsion of strife" can be read to mean that the world is simply chaos, or that chance determines everything. This is certainly how many people experience it. Indeed, Heraclitus seems to offer only a dark view of humankind in which people are largely blind and perpetuate this blindness by reproducing.

Is there a way out? There is something that is beyond the cycle of birth, suffering, and death, which is this hidden harmony (call it Logos, God, Mind, or Tao). Only in sensing this and appreciating it can we put human life into some perspective. The greatest suffering comes from believing something ephemeral to be solid and permanent. Only in accepting the flux for what it is do we give ourselves the space to see what never changes, what is timeless.

# 1748 An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding

"When we look about us towards external objects, and consider the operation of causes, we are never able, in a single instance, to discover any power or necessary connexion; any quality, which binds the effect to the cause, and renders one an infallible consequence of the other."

"The most perfect philosophy of the natural kind only staves off our ignorance a little longer: as perhaps the most perfect philosophy of the moral or metaphysical kind serves only to discover larger portions of it."

### In a nutshell

We can never assume that an effect is the result of a certain cause, or that a certain cause will have a definite effect. Humans like to see patterns and interpret stories from events, but there is no causal necessity between objects (or at least not as far as the human senses are able to tell).

### In a similar vein

René Descartes Meditations on First Philosophy (p 86) Immanuel Kant Critique of Pure Reason (p 156) Thomas Kuhn The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (p 172) John Locke Essay Concerning Human Understanding (p 184) Nassim Nicholas Taleb The Black Swan (p 294)

### CHAPTER 22 David Hume

David Hume is considered the greatest British philosopher and, through his influence on figures such as Kant (who famously said that Hume woke him from his "dogmatic slumber"), one of the major names in philosophy of the last 250 years.

Though his first book, A Treatise of Human Nature, "fell dead-born from the press," hardly noticed by anyone, it was a remarkable achievement, especially since it was written in his twenties. However, Hume's views on religion saw him passed over for academic philosophy posts, and it was only his History of England and Political Discourses, published in his forties, that led to him becoming well known and well off.

In terms of the history of philosophy, Hume's star really rose with the twentieth-century logical positivists like A.J. Ayer (who wrote a biography of him); today he is a patron saint of every kind of philosophical school that stands for empiricism and disavows metaphysical speculation. He can be interpreted in different ways, as we will see below.

An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding is a mature version of the *Treatise*, and in its relatively easy, nonacademic style is an excellent starting point for exploring Hume.

### We should be the real objects of study

While Hume is traditionally seen as a great philosophical skeptic who did not believe that his subject could achieve much, in the last few decades his work as a "scientist of human nature," attempting to do for philosophy what Newton did for natural science, is what has been emphasized.

Hume believed that our ability to reason was simply a result of language abilities, and that "human nature," or what we now call psychology, could be explained through knowing more about the brain and nervous system. He followed John Locke and George Berkeley in saying that experience, or the impressions that come to us through the five senses, and not reasoning should be the basis of philosophy.

Foreshadowing what the philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn would say in our time, Hume observed that "All sciences have a relation, greater or less, to human nature." We fool ourselves if we think that the natural sciences are an objective realm of knowledge outside humankind. In fact, by knowing human nature, Hume believed that you could create "a compleat system of the sciences." He felt that questions of logic, morals, and politics should be at least at the same level as natural science, and if he had been alive today he would no doubt have been a great supporter of psychology and the social sciences, because, as he put it in the *Treatise*, "The science of man is the only solid foundation for the other sciences."

### The limits of knowledge

For Hume, ancient and modern philosophers had all thought too highly of the powers of human reason. Great systems had been built to understand humans, God, and the universe, while forgetting that, ultimately, all we can know is what we observe directly through our five senses. Going completely against Descartes, Hume argued that there are no timeless, abstract ideas. Rather, all concepts are a secondhand rendering of initial perceptions or impressions of things from our senses; we cannot have a notion of something until we have experienced it. We can only imagine a golden mountain (if we have never seen one), for instance, because we are able to take our previous experiences of gold and of mountains and combine them.

Hume's views on causation are central to his thinking. He noted that while things appear to cause one another, this is simply our mind drawing connections. We cannot ever really say with certainty that one thing caused another, only that two things often form a "customary conjunction." When fire meets skin, for instance, we can assume that there will be pain, or that snow normally means cold, but there is nothing actually linking them.

Neither can we say that because one thing appears to be true, it is always true. In fact, Hume claims, much of human "knowledge" is simply a reliance on custom, or accepting what

everyone else says is true. Custom does not deliver truth, it merely makes life easier. It allows us to construct a meaningful world without having to recreate it through the senses anew every second.

Analyzing human perception, Hume observed that there is no real difference between imagination and reality save the level of belief we have in one or the other. "Reality" is simply what we believe in more strongly. He also rejected the idea that there is a solid, unitary self, an "I." We are, rather, merely a bundle of perceptions, our minds like a theater whose sets and scenes change every minute. (This is remarkably similar to the Buddhist view that there is no solid self, and that the "I" we experience is only a constant parade of ephemeral emotions and perceptions.) Hume doubted Descartes' idea that because we are thinking, we exist. All he felt could be said was that "thought exists," but it hardly proves the existence or permanence of the self, or of an individual soul.

#### The Hume debate

Hume has become a battleground for scholars.

The traditional positivist interpretation of Hume can be summed up in the "regularity theory" of causation: things don't cause each other to happen, and all we can say is that events can assume a certain regular pattern. To use Hume's example, we can see one billiard ball hitting another and assume that it is the cause of the second ball's movement, but we can never be certain about this. All we can say is that two objects are "contiguous, successive and constantly conjoined," and that there is no unseen "force" or "energy" moving things around. "An object may be contiguous and prior to another," he writes, "without being consider'd its cause."

The positivist camp supports Hume's view that anyone claiming to pinpoint a cause and its effect will have to talk in "unintelligible terms" (meaning metaphysical), which are an affront to philosophy. Indeed, Hume famously ends the *Enquiry* with a dramatic call for rigor in philosophy and for all metaphysical works to be taken with a grain of salt. Any book that does not contain "any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number," or that does not rest in reasoning based

### **Chronological list of titles**

Sun Tzu The Art of War (4th century BCE)

Baltasar Gracian The Art of Worldly Wisdom (1647)

Benjamin Franklin The Way to Wealth (1758)

Horatio Alger Ragged Dick (1867)

Orison Swett Marden Pushing to the Front (1894)

Wallace D. Wattles The Science of Getting Rich (1910)

Andrew Carnegie *The Autobiography of Andrew Carnegie* (1920)

Edward Bok The Americanization of Edward Bok (1921)

Russell H. Conwell Acres of Diamonds (1921)

Henry Ford My Life and Work (1922)

George S. Clason The Richest Man in Babylon (1926)

Robert Collier The Secret of the Ages (1926)

Napoleon Hill Think and Grow Rich (1937)

Florence Scovel Shinn The Secret Door to Success (1940)

Frank Bettger How I Raised Myself from Failure to Success in Selling (1947)

Claude M. Bristol *The Magic of Believing* (1948)

Les Giblin How to Have Confidence and Power in Dealing with People (1956)

David J. Schwartz The Magic of Thinking Big (1959)

Napoleon Hill & W. Clement Stone Success through a Positive Mental Attitude (1960)

John Paul Getty How to Be Rich (1961)

Catherine Ponder The Dynamic Laws of Prosperity (1962)

Muriel James & Dorothy Jongeward Born to Win (1971)

W. Timothy Gallwey *The Inner Game of Tennis* (1974)

Zig Ziglar See You at the Top (1975)

Kenneth Blanchard & Spencer Johnson The One Minute

Hume was generally well liked (his nickname was "le bon David") and his writing style reflects his personality: undogmatic and compassionate. Like his friend and contemporary Adam Smith (economist and author of *The Wealth of Nations*), he wrote in such a way that as many people as possible could read him – which is one more reason to appreciate him.

### **David Hume**

Hume was born in Edinburgh in 1711. He came from a good family on both sides, but he was not rich and his father died when he was a baby. While at Edinburgh University he began writing A Treatise of Human Nature, and instead of graduating, went to Bristol to work as a clerk in a counting house. He then lived in France for three years, taking on a rigorous program of self-study.

The Treatise was published in 1739 with scarcely any recognition, but Hume's Essays (1741–42), including writings on political economy that foreshadowed Adam Smith's, were successful. Never a philosophy professor, his views on religion ruled him out of posts at Edinburgh and Glasgow Universities. His various positions included tutor for a year to a mad English nobleman, librarian, Undersecretary of State in London, and secretary to the British ambassador in Paris. This latter post enabled him to mix with other figures of the European Enlightenment outside Scotland, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whom he befriended but later fell out with. Hume was a supporter of the union between England and Scotland that had taken place in 1707.

Books include An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals (1751), Political Discourses (1752), and History of England (6 volumes, 1754–62). His Four Dissertations of 1757 contained the controversial "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion," which he arranged to be published posthumously (he died in 1776). James Boswell visited Hume on his

deathbed and reported that the famous "atheist" remained in a jokey mood until his last breath.

### 1907 Pragmatism

"A pragmatist turns his back resolutely and once for all upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers. He turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action, and towards power."

"[A]n idea is 'true' so long as to believe it is profitable to our lives ... truth is ONE SPECIES OF GOOD, and not, as is usually supposed, a category distinct from good, and coordinate with it. THE TRUE IS THE NAME OF WHATEVER PROVES ITSELF TO BE GOOD."

"Rationalism sticks to logic and the empyrean. Empiricism sticks to the external senses. Pragmatism is willing to take anything, to follow either logic or the senses, and to count the humblest and most personal experiences. She will count mystical experiences if they have practical consequences."

### In a nutshell

A belief or idea has value only if it "works" – that is, changes our world in some way. Other notions and ideas, however attractive or elegant, should be dismissed.

### In a similar vein

A.J. Ayer Language, Truth and Logic (p 28)
Jeremy Bentham Principles of Morals and Legislation (p 50)
David Hume An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (p

# CHAPTER 23 William James

Pragmatism is a collection of unedited lectures that William James gave at New York's Columbia University in 1906–07, at the end of his career. One of America's great thinkers, he did not claim to have created the philosophy of pragmatism (this was Charles Sanders Peirce's achievement, and it was further developed by F.C.S. Schiller and John Dewey), but he did make it clearer and brought it to a general audience. James defines pragmatism as "the attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories', supposed first necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts."

Pragmatism is a close intellectual cousin of utilitarianism. Both outlooks carry a deep suspicion of abstract academic philosophy, and an abiding interest only in the practical value of concepts. Indeed, James intended pragmatism as a way to see other philosophies. Today, academic iconoclasts such as Richard Rorty carry James's flame.

### Philosophy is temperament

James starts by noting that every individual has a philosophy, which he describes as the

"more or less dumb sense of what life honestly and deeply means. It is only partly got from books; it is our individual way of just seeing and feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos."

He notes G.K. Chesterton's remark that the landlady does not only want to know the lodger's income and job, they want a sense of the applicant's whole outlook on life. Personal philosophy is everything, a fact that academic philosophers, in their wish to be seen as objective discerners of truth, somehow gloss over.

James bluntly says, "The history of philosophy is to a great extent that of a certain clash of human temperaments." He means that the conclusions of philosophers come more from their personal biases than any objective findings. Their theories, perceived as "tough-minded" or "tender-minded," are

Putting his finger on the dilemma for so many of us living in a scientific age, James says:

"the greatest enemy of any one of our truths may be the rest of our truths. Truths have ... this desperate instinct of self-preservation and of desire to extinguish whatever contradicts them. My belief in the Absolute, based on the good it does me, must run the gauntlet of all my other beliefs."

In other words, a belief in God or an absolute of some kind provides us with a "moral holiday," but is it one we can afford, given the reality of everything else we have learned? If a person still finds that, despite all the evidence against it, their faith or belief in nonmaterial reality still brings strong benefits, then they are not being irrational at all; they are being pragmatic. Pragmatism differs totally from empiricism in that it has "no prejudices whatever, no rigid canons or what shall count as proof ... she will entertain any hypothesis" as long as its rational benefit can be shown.

Pragmatism, in short, "widens the field of search for God," following either logic or the senses, and will "count the humblest and most personal experiences. She will count mystical experiences if they have practical consequences." The latter point is a link to James's book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which fully admitted (even if James himself did not have the temperament for epiphanies) that conversion experiences could transform a person's life. Conversions showed beyond doubt that huge practical benefit could come from an abstract idea.

### Final comments

James highlights the division between a monistic view of the universe, in which everything is seen as one, and a pluralistic one, which focuses on the astonishing diversity and plurality of life. The traditional view is that only the former is religious, the latter drawing a picture of chaos. But James maintains that we can still have a belief in the power of a pluralist cosmology even if we believe that there is no divine or other "logical necessity" in the unfolding of the world. Progress happens through "sheer desire," he says, occurring through individuals and "in spots." It is we who make the world what it is, and if we

want a different life or a different world we must act.
In asking why anything should exist at all, James replies:

"the only REAL reason I can think of why anything should ever come is that someone wishes it to be here. It is DEMANDED ... to give relief to no matter how small a fraction of the world's mass. This is living reason, and compared with it material causes and logical necessities are spectral things."

James's answer is not surprising when we consider his philosophy overall, which is that events themselves carry the truth (the proof is in the pudding, as it were). We can believe that God created the universe in seven days, or that it started on its own accord with the Big Bang, but either way our explanations do not really matter. The fact is that the universe is here, so in pragmatic terms it makes sense to study only what exists.

### William James

Born in New York in 1842, James had a comfortable and cultured upbringing. In his teens the family, including Henry (later the famous writer), moved to Europe, where James learned several languages. Returning to the United States in 1860, he spent a year and a half trying to become a painter, then enrolled at Harvard, where he took courses in medicine. In 1865 he went on a scientific expedition with the well-known naturalist Louis Agassiz, but on the journey he suffered an array of health problems and was homesick.

In 1867 James went to Germany and studied physiology, and was exposed to thinkers and ideas in the new field of psychology. Two years later he returned to Harvard, where at 27 he finally received his medical degree. At 30 he obtained a post there teaching physiology, but only after having recovered from an emotional breakdown. In 1875 he began giving courses in psychology, and also established the first experimental psychology laboratory in America. In the year he began work on The Principles of Psychology, 1878, he married Alice Howe Gibbons, a Boston schoolteacher. They had five children.

James met Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung on their visits to America, knew Bertrand Russell, Henri Bergson, Mark Twain, and Horatio Alger, and had among his students educationalist John Dewey and psychologist Edward Thorndike. Other key writings include The Will to Believe (1897) and The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902). He died in 1910.

### 2011 Thinking, Fast and Slow

"Extreme predictions and a willingness to predict rare events from weak evidence are both manifestations of System 1 ... And it is natural for System 1 to generate overconfident judgements, because confidence ... is determined by the coherence of the best story you can tell from the evidence at hand. Be warned: your intuitions will deliver predictions that are too extreme and you will be inclined to put far too much faith in them."

"My personal hindsight-avoiding policy is to be either very thorough or completely casual when making a decision with long-term consequences."

### In a nutshell

Because the way we think determines what we know, psychological research plays an important part in the search for philosophical truth.

### In a similar vein

David Hume *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (p. 136)

Nassim Nicholas Taleb The Black Swan (p 294)

## CHAPTER 24 Daniel Kahneman

Daniel Kahneman is a psychologist who also happened to win a Nobel Prize in Economics for his work in "prospect theory" (or making decisions under uncertainty). He has also made major contributions to the psychology of perception and attention, behavioral economics, and hedonic psychology (or what makes people happy, and when they are happiest). That he has been honored at the highest level in two disciplines is a tip that Kahneman is a modern-day Renaissance man, and his work (as he has admitted) has significant implications for philosophy.

In a 2012 lecture, "Thinking That We Know," Kahneman noted that "the shared search for agreed and objective truth is the central mission of science. But the sense of truth is a subjective experience, which falls in the domain of psychology." In other words, we are desperate to know things, but – as Hume noted – we perceive the world through our senses, so our interpretation of what we see and hear is different for each of us. We have a different experience of "truth." Even within our own mind there is no universality or standard way of perceiving.

Thinking, Fast and Slow is the culmination of his stellar career as a research psychologist, summarizing the wellknown experiments with colleague Amos Tversky on judgment and decision making, specifically the systematic errors (or biases) that are reasonably predictable in certain circumstances. Our intuition is often right, but there are plenty of other times when it is wrong. Moreover, we are often way too confident about our judgments than we have a right to be (we are "a machine for jumping to conclusions," he says); objective observers frequently have a more accurate picture of a situation than we do. We are "strangers to ourselves," Kahneman argues, not really always in control of our thoughts. And worryingly, not only can we be blind to the obvious, "we can be blind to our blindness." Kahneman's work has also revealed the two quite different ways in which we think: "fast" (system 1) and "slow" (system 2).

found that subjects holding a pencil in their mouth such that their mouth was spread wide (like a smile) made them find cartoons funnier than if they were holding a pencil in their mouth in a way that resembled a frown.

An image of wide open, staring eyes above an honesty box in a university cafeteria makes people more likely to be honest about putting the appropriate money into the box. When the image is of flowers, they are less likely to be honest. This is the "priming" effect. In another experiment, subjects primed with images of dollar bills were less likely to be cooperative or to engage in group activity, and more likely to want to do something on their own. Other studies have demonstrated that reminding people of old age makes them walk more slowly; and that having polling booths in schools makes people more likely to vote for school funding measures (if they are undecided in the first place).

Similar to priming is the "anchoring" effect, best illustrated by the fact that a number suggested or stated before a question is asked will affect the answer. For instance, people told that "Gandhi died when he was 144" nearly always give an estimate of his actual age of death that is much higher than they would otherwise. Another example is shoppers who are told there is a limit of "12 items per buyer," which nearly always makes them buy more.

Kahneman discusses the "halo effect," which states that, for instance, if we like a politician's policies, we are likely to think that he is good looking too. If we flirt with someone at a party, we are more likely to promote them as "generous" if asked to give an assessment of their likelihood to give to a charity, even if we know nothing about them. The halo effect sometimes dramatically increases the weight of first impressions, and often subsequent impressions do not matter at all. When grading exam papers, Kahneman admits that his rating of the first essay in a student's exam booklet had a big influence on how he saw the other essays. He shifted to reading the class's essays by order of topic, not by student, and his ratings became much more accurate.

The "availability bias" tells us that our estimate of the likelihood of things occurring is very much affected by what