

# To Hume it may concern – we can all learn from the thinkers

Take some life lessons from great philosophers, advises **Peter Cave**, as they have done the heavy lifting on ideas which might just inspire you

What's the point of philosophy? A little philosophical reasoning reminds us that not everything valuable needs a point. Many people value pleasure, without demanding its point. If, though, pleasure alone is of ultimate value – well, buy itching powder, sprinkle, scratch and delight in resultant pleasures; repeat, repeat...

Philosophy begins in wonder, wrote Plato. His reflections above bring us to an 18th-century Scot, the greatest philosopher born in these Isles – so far.

How can we not warm to a philosopher who confesses his philosophical puzzlings generate melancholy and delirium? He would leave his study, closing the door firmly behind him; he would dine, play backgammon and be merry with friends. His puzzlings soon appeared so ridiculous that he lacked heart to re-enter. Of course, he did re-enter – rightly so.

His well-respected friend, another intellectual giant, described him as generous, good natured, good humoured – 'as nearly to a

perfectly wise and virtuous man, as human frailty permits'.

The friend is Glasgow's economist Adam Smith; the philosopher is Edinburgh's David Hume. Philosophy and economics then intertwined as 'moral sciences'. Despite loss of Hume's name from a certain university tower, Hume remains much admired for his life, works and confessed bafflement. He was, for example, mystified by what sense I can make of my self – you of your self – continuing over the years, despite radical changes in mind and body – and with no sight, or site, of a self.

The self's nature is as obscure as obsessive concern for one's self is depressing. Schopenhauer, philosopher of pessimism, recommended music in which to lose the self. Samuel Beckett – yes, my 30 philosophers extend beyond those commonly deemed 'philosophers' – replaced Descartes' 'I think, therefore I am' with 'I don't know what I am'. Iris Murdoch wrote of 'unselfing': observing the beauty of a hovering kestrel cleared her mind of selfish concern.



← The statue of David Hume in Edinburgh, main; author Peter Cave, opposite; his new book, inset

Hume influenced others of my 30 philosophers. He awoke the great Immanuel Kant from 'dogmatic slumbers' and his thinking continued through John Stuart Mill, son of another distinguished Scot, James Mill.

More recently, Humean influence is found in Bertrand Russell – once popularly known for CND sit-ins – and GE Moore, an on-off friend of Russell. Contrasting with Russell's wayward ways, Moore possessed a purity, one that inspired Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Group. He magnificently defended common sense, marking some similarity with Thomas Reid, Aberdeen's 18th-century philosopher.

Philosophy can be abstruse, but to help us in our lives, it needs clear expression, accessible language – as Hume and Moore and, indeed, the Gadfly Socrates sought to achieve.

'The unexamined life is not worth living' argued Socrates. Hume's examination highlighted friendship and sympathy. Contrary to the times, Hume opposed slavery. Because he challenged all religions, he became the 'Great Infidel', yet the label misleads. When he met Paris's seriously atheistic philosophers, he was shocked.

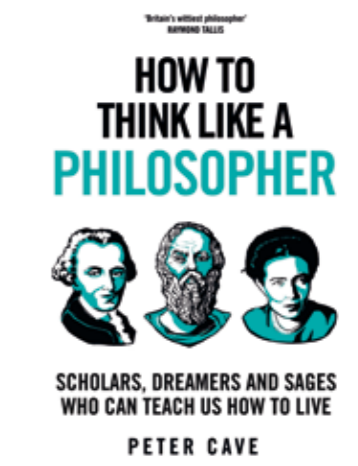
Spinoza, 'God-intoxicated atheist', suffered more than some name-calling. The Amsterdam Synagogue excommunicated him: 'cursed be he by day; cursed be he by night'. Curses rained down – not at all good for his trading business.

To think with the philosophers, we meet with Leibniz's 'best of all possible worlds', Kierkegaard's subjective leap of faith and entangled existentialist anguishes of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir confronting our freedom to choose how to live.

'If we possess our why of life,' wrote Nietzsche – he of 'God is dead' fame – 'we can put up with almost any how. Man does not strive after happiness; only the Englishman does that.' I have no idea if Nietzsche included the Scots. Beauvoir, when philoso-

phising with Simone Weil, emphasised the need for people to find meaning in their existence. Weil replied, 'It's easy to see you've never gone hungry.' Weil urges us to feel for what it is like to be oppressed, disparaged, hungry; in doing so, she virtually starved herself to death. Karl Marx – even Adam Smith – noted how capitalism can alienate populations more generally. Witness how today we are at the mercy of 'the markets'.

Smiles arise when learning of some philosophers' lives. Enemies of Descartes rumoured he constructed a mechanical doll, named after his illegitimate daughter Francine, and took 'her' even to bed. Bishop Berkeley, the astonishing immaterialist, proclaimed tar-water as cure for virtually every illness, even preserving trees from the biting of goats.



Russell looked under desks to show the young Wittgenstein the truth 'there's no hippopotamus here'. No truth, but nonsense, insisted Wittgenstein. Lewis Carroll's tales have the White King insisting that someone must have been seen because Alice saw 'nobody' on the road.

How can we talk about something if 'it' doesn't exist? Yet we do. When friends have died, we maintain regard for them, though 'they' no longer exist.

Hume speaks up for good reasoning. Is it rational to believe in miracles? On the one hand, 'miraculous' events, if truly miracles, are exceptionally unlikely. On the other hand, the unreliability of reports, be it by mistake, intention or wishful thinking, especially over considerable time-spans, is well attested. 'A wise man pro-

portions his belief to the evidence' – hence, on balance, we should dismiss reports of miracles.

The Christian religion, wrote Hume, cannot be believed by any reasonable person without a miracle. Is he delightfully quipping? 'Oops, perhaps I'm wrong; perhaps there's one miracle – people's belief in miracles.'

Much of what we do and believe cannot, though, be rationally justified, argued Hume. Will it rain tomorrow? All you have to go on is past experience, but how can you possibly know that past weather patterns are good guides to the future? Maybe they were good guides in the past, but in the future? Custom, concludes Hume, is the great guide of human life. We cannot help but think in certain ways.

Hume manifested his good humour to the end. James Boswell visited him, hoping the Great Infidel would recant. Boswell was disappointed. No recantation.

For our end here, we return to Nietzsche, to his most terrifying thought: Eternal Recurrence.

What if a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say unto you that this life as you live it, you will have to live innumerable times again with nothing new in it. Every joy, every thought, every sigh must return, exactly as before.

Nietzsche then asks: would you not throw yourself down, gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? How well disposed would you have to be – to long for nothing more fervently than such eternity?

Even if we can face such questions, we may be unable to say what gives meaning to our lives. That inability underlies my book's first chapter's Lao Tzu and maybe my final chapter's Samuel Beckett. They would warm to Wittgenstein's aphorism 'Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must remain silent'.

Maybe Hume would agree – though, good humouredly, he would question quite what it all meant.

● *How to Think Like a Philosopher: Scholars, Dreamers and Sages Who Can Teach Us How to Live* by Peter Cave is published by Bloomsbury Continuum, priced £16.99

