

CONFESSIONS OF A PHILOSOPHER

Bryan Magee is one of the world's great explainers of philosophy. Magee's gift is not just an ability to present abstract ideas clearly, but to give his readers the experience of them, an experience which, at its best, is a sort of intellectual/aesthetic, explanatory/puzzling high. He achieves this level of intensity by being broadly knowledgeable and insightful, but also opinionated and emphatic and outspoken. He is, in short, the ideal philosophical companion.

Magee is not a professional philosopher, and this book is not a general overview of the subject; nor is it a conventional memoir. As he says in preface, it "introduces the reader to philosophy and its history through the story of one person's encounter with them. So it is about ideas: the autobiographical element is medium, not message." Magee's academic training (at Oxford and Yale) was in philosophy, but he made no attempt to take a PhD in the subject. Instead, he pursued careers in politics and in television broadcasting. Over the years Magee produced two series of programs on philosophy for the BBC. He also taught philosophy at Oxford, and had close friendships with several of the most prominent philosophers in Great Britain, among them Karl Popper and Bertrand Russell (both of whom have chapters in the book).

The point of studying great philosophy, Magee claims, is to gain insights into the world that alter your perceptions and understanding of it; to encounter ideas through which, as Schopenhauer said of his own experience reading Kant, "the mind undergoes a fundamental undeceiving, and thereafter looks at all things in another light." Certain types of philosophical problems have drawn Magee's attention since childhood, and he argues here for the preeminence of what he takes to be these "real philosophical problems":

The ur-question of philosophy through most of its history has been
What, ultimately, is there? This was the dominant question for the
pre-Socratics, and it has underlain, when it has not dominated,

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most of the best philosophy since. In pursuit of an answer, philosophers have asked a multitude of subsidiary questions, such as *What is the nature of physical objects? What is space? What is causal connection? What is time?* And by a natural progression from this they have become deeply exercised about the possibility of human knowledge: *How can we find out these things? Can we know any of them for certain? If so, which? And how can we be sure we know when we do know?*

One of the central philosophical threads of the book, then, is an account of theories of perception and knowledge: problems such as how (or whether) we can know that our perceptions correspond to reality. What, Descartes asked, can we know with complete certainty? Descartes's insight (as Magee explains it) was that "far from the objective being certain and the subjective uncertain, the only existences of which we can be indubitably sure are the immediate deliverances of our own consciousness." John Locke introduced the idea that independent of a subject to perceive it, an object cannot have such properties as color, taste, and smell; in itself, an object can have only physically measurable properties such as weight or mass. All we can know of objects in the world is these qualities, which we perceive with our senses. But if all we can know of the world is our experience, Berkeley asked, then what reason do we have to believe that anything but our experience exists in the world? Why postulate the existence of a world of objects outside us?

Hume accepted Berkeley's arguments that we cannot prove the existence of an external world. However, "unless we are making a strained and self-conscious attempt to be philosophers we cannot prevent ourselves from believing in the existence of an external material world, even though it cannot be proved . . . it is impossible for anyone actually to *live* as a skeptic." (Or, via Borges: "Hume noted for all time that Berkeley's arguments did not admit the slightest refutation nor did they cause the slightest conviction.") Nonetheless, Hume went on to demonstrate that "almost everything we believe in, or take for granted, is not in fact known, and can never be known. . . . We know almost nothing. Our thoughts are connected by the most part not by logic but by association of ideas, and our behavior is guided not by genuine understanding of reality but by habitual expectation and custom."

This account of the development of empiricism will be familiar to many readers, but what is less familiar to a general reader is the response to Hume's skepticism put forward by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Magee devotes several chapters to Kant's theories of space and time, and to

Schopenhauer's refinement and extension of Kant's ideas. His presentation of these concepts is the clearest I have seen. But it is not made simpler than would give the real character of the ideas, and like most of the philosophical discussions in this book, these sections reward slow reading, as well as rereading. (Fortunately, Magee is somewhat repetitive. This might be a flaw in another type of book, but it is helpful here; Kant's theories, for example, are summarized in several other chapters, notably in the sections on Schopenhauer and Popper.)

Though the ideas of Kant on space and time have a stunning beauty, most non-philosophers will not wish to wade through Kant's prose for this experience. ("Kant happened to be a bad writer who lacked a musical ear and was scribbling in a hurry to get his thoughts down on paper before he died, desperately trying to find ways of expressing profound ideas that were radically different from anything anyone had ever expressed before, and doing it in a language that had never yet been used for any such purpose.") Magee warns that reading primary texts is essential to understanding them; no secondary report can capture the richness of a thinker in full. But reading Magee on Kant and Schopenhauer might be the next best thing. The strength of this book is that it can give a careful reader an almost visceral feel for philosophical theories. There was a moment when I stopped reading to take an idea in: Schopenhauer's argument that for the world in itself (that is, the noumenal world, the world outside of human perception) to be differentiated in any way presupposes notions of space and time, notions which Kant claimed can exist only in our minds. I looked up from the book and focused on the objects in front of me—a coffee cup on a marble table—and for a moment, glimpsed behind these forms undifferentiated matter: one thing of two. It may seem absurd to claim that this book (these ideas) can make the world look different, but I think this is true.

Magee, also, seems to feel ideas as an intense aesthetic experience. His description of his life apart from philosophy shows it to be largely devoted to such experiences: evenings of theater, music, etc. Prominently featured among Magee's list of pleasures is his sex life. He says a number of times how fabulous it is, but gives no details of it whatsoever, a teasing omission which every reader of this book I know has complained of. It is a curious gap, of which he sometimes seems to be aware: "I was puzzled by how little attention philosophers had paid to [sex]. . . . Its metaphysical paramountcy stared them in the face, yet they had nothing to say about it," Magee writes—but then he follows suit.

In fact Magee ranks not philosophy but music as the greatest of his passions, especially the music of Wagner (on whom he has also written a book). For Magee these experiences are not compartmentalized; there is for him no line drawn between the impulses toward intellectual and aesthetic expression: "Great music, great theatre, and great philosophy seemed to be articulating something to do with the same thing." As the idea is developed by Schopenhauer, the philosopher with whom Magee feels the greatest affinity both as writer and thinker: "Not merely philosophy but also the fine arts work at bottom towards the solution of the problem of existence. . . . The result of every purely objective, and so of every artistic, apprehension of things is an articulation of more of the true nature of life and of existence, of more of the answer to the question 'What is life?' Every genuine and successful work of art answers this question in its own way."

In keeping with this unity of aesthetic and intellectual experience, Magee discusses not only the theoretical content of philosophers, but also their merits as "literary personalities," and his experience of reading their books. He describes reading *The World as Will and Representation* and feeling that many of the thoughts he'd had his entire life were for the first time given a clear articulation. (In fact, Magee describes a mid-life crisis resolved in part by writing a novel, in part by his discovery of Schopenhauer.) Among other philosophers he feels should be read more widely for the pleasure of their writing styles are Hume, Bertrand Russell, Nietzsche, and Descartes. I am particularly fond of his description of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: "I do not think I have ever been so astonished, either before or since, at the discovery of what *sort* of book a book was. . . . [Wittgenstein's sentences] have the capacity to smoulder in one's mind for the rest of one's life."

Magee's own prose combines clarity with enormous energy. I was impressed with the dense informational content of even short asides: a concise description of Chomsky's theories of language acquisition; a defense of Descartes to a petulant grad student; a description of a course in political philosophy at Yale (in a chapter I expected to find boring: who writes about the classes they took in graduate school?). Such consistent generosity of explanation gives the book an intellectual richness that makes reading (and especially rereading) even random pages a pleasure.

The one drawback to my wholehearted recommendation of this book to the general reader is the order in which the various schools of philosophy are introduced. Magee narrates the book as personal history, and his own first

encounter with professional philosophy was as a student at Oxford. At that time the philosophy department was dominated by proponents of logical positivism (and after that, linguistic philosophy), movements of which Magee is harshly critical: "Oxford philosophy on the one hand, and philosophy as carried on by such figures as Plato and Aristotle, Descartes, Leibniz, Locke, Hume, and Kant on the other, are not only not the same activity but are not, at bottom, importantly related." This manner of doing philosophy confused and disappointed him as a young man, and I think it is also likely to confuse readers new to the subject. It is difficult to see just why Magee criticizes these people as having "no real philosophical problems" before becoming familiar with what he takes these sorts of problems to be.

For many readers, then, the beginning of the book (that is, Chapter 2; Chapter 1 tells of Magee's childhood) is not the best place to start. But the book does not need to be read in order. The more personal chapters, such as those covering Magee's careers in politics or in television, or his mid-life crisis, do not fill in all the gaps of Magee's life, but can be read almost as thoughtful digressions. The chapters tracing the problems of perception from the empiricists through Kant and Schopenhauer (spread out in the book) could be read as a set. Or the early chapters on Oxford philosophy could be skimmed as an entertaining introduction to the pitfalls of "professional philosophy," and to an aggressive style of intellectual combat.

It should also be mentioned that Magee does not devote much attention to contemporary philosophy, or to moral philosophy. There is no attempt made to be complete. This is Magee's account of those philosophers who engaged a hard passion in him, the books without which his life would not have been the same: "I honestly believe that, since [Kant's] *Critique of Pure Reason* is unlikely to be read and understood by anyone who is not a serious student of philosophy, it is worth studying philosophy in order to understand that one book." How many people would say this of any book? But if you don't have another life to devote to reading Kant, and are curious, then read Magee.