





# PHILOSOPHY BITES BACK

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OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,  
United Kingdom

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It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,  
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First Edition published in 2012

Impression: 1

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data  
Data available

ISBN 978-0-19-969300-9

Printed in Great Britain by  
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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# INTRODUCTION

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Who is the most important philosopher in history? Every now and again philosophers are asked about this in silly but enjoyable polls. A few names routinely crop up; no roll call could exclude Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, Kant, or Marx. But the philosophical canon is not fixed: it is a contested list, subject to argument and, occasionally, bitter disagreement. There was an outcry in Cambridge University in 1992, when the university authorities proposed to award the French thinker Jacques Derrida an honorary doctorate.

The following interviews are not meant to provide comprehensive coverage of the canon. There are notable philosophers whom you won't read about here, as well as some who aren't normally included on any core curriculum. Think of this list as more like an intellectual tasting-menu, an offering of morsels, packed, we hope, with philosophical nutrition. The contributors have made some suggestions for further reading which are included at the end of the book.

Philosophy now has over two and a half millennia of ideas from which to draw. Each generation rereads and reinterprets the significant figures from the past. We are fortunate to have spoken to some of today's leading exponents about some of yesteryear's most important thinkers.

The interviews began in oral form for *Philosophy Bites* ([www.philosophybites.com](http://www.philosophybites.com)), a popular podcast which as this book goes to print has had over 15 million downloads. When *Philosophy Bites* began, sceptics claimed there would be minimal interest in what they regarded as its esoteric material. But from all around the world, people have listened in to hear about Plato's views on love, Kant's synthetic a priori propositions, or Sartre's existentialism.

We are extremely grateful to the philosophers we've interviewed over the years: we've now had the privilege of hundreds of hours of free tutorials with some very clever and interesting people. We're especially thankful to those philosophers who appear in the book and who've granted permission for the interviews to be used in written form. All the interviews have been adapted so that they work as well as possible for the page. We'd like to thank our wives Anna and Liz, our agents, Caroline Dawnay and Veronique Baxter, and two institutions, London University's Institute of Philosophy and Oxford University's Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics. The Institute of Philosophy has helped fund us, and provided us with a room in central London in which to conduct many of the interviews. Barry Smith and Shahrar Ali have provided constant encouragement, tips for interviewees and the occasional glass of rather fine wine. We've also conducted several interviews at Oxford's Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics and are grateful to the Centre's dynamic Director, Julian Savulescu and also to the Centre's administrators, Miriam Wood and Deborah Sheehan.

Finally, thanks to our regular (unpaid) proofreader, Hannah Edmonds, to OUP's proofreader Javier Kalhat, and to our editors at OUP, Peter Momtchiloff, who commissioned this and our earlier *Philosophy Bites* book, and Eleanor Collins who saw it through production.

We dedicate this book to our children: Saul, Joshua, and Hannah.

*David Edmonds and Nigel Warburton, April 2012*  
[www.philosophybites.com](http://www.philosophybites.com)

## WHO IS YOUR FAVOURITE PHILOSOPHER?

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For the past couple of years we've been asking the philosophers we've met a simple question, for which they were given no warning—who is their favourite philosopher and why? The eighteenth-century Scot, David Hume, came out first. That was no great surprise, though the extent of his lead was: he was the choice of more than 20 per cent of our sample. The other major philosophers always cited in the canon, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Mill, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, were all well represented, but far behind.

*Sarah Bakewell: I'd have to go for two: Michel de Montaigne, who wrote essays about his life with philosophical turn, because he is so much an ordinary human being; and also Friedrich Nietzsche because he also came at philosophy from completely unexpected angles. Like Montaigne, Nietzsche always looked for the underlying, unexpected angle to everything he wrote about.*

*Helen Beebe: My favourite philosopher is David Hume. His writings, particularly A Treatise of Human Nature, are a phenomenal intellectual achievement, and incredibly ahead of their time. He asked questions that others hadn't thought to ask. He challenged the orthodoxy when it came to religion and causation. I believe some of the things that Hume believed, but that's a side issue—I think a lot of philosophers have Hume as their favourite philosopher even if they don't really agree with what he says.*

*Nick Bostrom: That's putting me on the spot. I'm not sure I have one favourite philosopher. Contemporary philosophy, at least the way I'm doing it, is more like science in that many people have made significant contributions and you're not so much following in the footsteps of one great individual but you're more drawing on the heritage of many people working over a long time.*

*Luc Bovens: I very much enjoy reading Aristotle. When you read Aristotle, every letter, every word feels important. You have the feeling that he was writing in parchment. Every time I read Aristotle I see new things. At the London School of Economics we have an interest in philosophy being continuous with the sciences—this may be a controversial claim—and when you're reading Aristotle sometimes what you see is a proto-economist at work. You see a continuity between the style of argumentation that is used in philosophy and the style of argumentation used in the sciences. And deep down there is no distinction: that's what I find is so wonderful in Aristotle.*

*Pascal Bruckner: Well, as with every guy in my generation, when I was young it was Jean-Paul Sartre. I no longer have a favourite philosopher, but I have a big array of favourite philosophers going from John Locke to John Stuart Mill, Emmanuel Levinas, Karl Jaspers, Hannah Arendt. It's hard to pick just one and elect him or her as your master.*

*Noël Carroll: I guess my favourite philosopher is Aristotle. Perhaps the biographical reason is that I was trained a Catholic and I've had Thomism drilled into my bones since the early days. But I appreciate both his naturalist approach and, in reference to human affairs, the teleological approach.*

*David Chalmers: Lately, I've been very taken by the works of Rudolf Carnap who was a logical empiricist working in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s: his great work is Der logische Aufbau der Welt (The Logical Structure of the World) and right now I'm trying to work on a project that recapitulates some*



*of Carnap's ideas and somehow tries to figure out the fundamental structure of descriptions of reality and where we can go from there. He's been an inspiration to me.*

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*Clare Chambers: Well, I'm enormously impressed by the work of Catharine MacKinnon, who is a political philosopher and also an active legal scholar and practitioner. Her work is extremely significant both theoretically and practically.*

*Pat Churchland: My true, true love is David Hume: Saint David, as Simon Blackburn calls him. And that's because he was first of all tremendously dedicated to getting to the bottom of things. He was totally unswayed by fashion and the current ways of doing things; he zeroed in, in the most intelligent way, on the most difficult issues, and he got so much right.*

*Tim Crane: Descartes. Not because I think what he said was true, but because he was incredibly clear in his vision of things. He had an ambitious conception of the world that he wanted to fit everything into—and he did that in a very, very simple and clear way. And I like that.*

*Alain de Botton: Probably my favourite philosopher is Nietzsche because he has a fascinating metaphysical structure to his thought and at the same time writes beautifully, has a sense of humour, and is a genuine creative artist.*

*Michael Dummett: Gottlob Frege, because he was the first philosopher to give a clear analysis of the structure of sentences, and thereby of the thoughts that they express.*

*Ronald Dworkin: Well, I am very attracted to Immanuel Kant's work: it seems to me an endless source of interpretation and reinterpretation. One of the books that has given me most pleasure is a book sitting just there called Kant et Dworkin. And the pleasure is increased by the fact that I can't read it: it's in French.*

*Cécile Fabre: Oh my God. Can I have two? Yes. Well, my favourite philosopher in the English language is Thomas Hobbes. He writes with extraordinary beauty and in a way that is utterly compelling, even though his substantive conclusion, that is, that we should have an absolute monarch is completely counterintuitive. My favourite philosopher in French is Rousseau, again because he writes very beautifully, very concisely. He has similarly counterintuitive views, but somehow writes about those views so compellingly that I keep being drawn back to his works, again and again.*

*Kit Fine: My favourite philosopher is Aristotle. He's one of the greatest geniuses of all time who wrote profoundly on a wide range of questions.*

*Cynthia Freeland: Aristotle. And that might surprise people because I am a feminist, and known as such, and he said so many misogynist things. But I think Aristotle was a philosopher who was grounded in biology and in trying to deal with the real world, and I'm an admirer of his respect for living organisms and also for his purchase on ethics: virtue ethics. So I find him very appealing.*

*Raymond Geuss: My favourite philosopher is Thucydides. And he's my favourite philosopher because nobody else thinks he's a philosopher, but I think he is.*

*Jonathan Glover: Socrates. Not because I accept many of his opinions, but because he invented the whole thing. I still teach, as does everyone in philosophy, by the methods Socrates invented. You ask*

people, 'what do you think about this, what's your opinion?', and then you press for maximum clarity and explicitness: 'do you mean this, or do you mean that?' When you've got it really clear, then there are counterexamples: 'Oh, that's your view, is it, but what about applying that principle to this case, surely you can't think this?' And this is the method of philosophy: it's a wonderful method. That's Socrates' first contribution. His second contribution was that he didn't shut himself off in some academy, but talked in the marketplace to people. He'd have been on Philosophy Bites, if he'd had the chance. Too many philosophers in my opinion treat philosophy as a kind of esoteric, technical thing, which isn't for the public. This is a huge loss.

Alison Gopnik: My favourite philosopher is David Hume. Partly because he's one of the few philosophers who you think would have been a really, really nice guy. But also because he was known not only as a father of philosophy but also of psychology, and he was someone who thought very profoundly about philosophical questions but also about empirical, psychological questions. And also because he was someone who appreciated the role of sentiment and emotion and everyday life in abstract logical argument.

John Horton: Probably my favourite philosopher is not a political philosopher at all. It's Ludwig Wittgenstein, who is simply the greatest philosopher that I've ever read: for his incredible rethinking of philosophy as an activity.

Alan Howarth: Well, my favourite philosopher would be a cross between Wittgenstein, John Stuart Mill, and Karl Marx: Wittgenstein for his careful, analytical approach to philosophy and his sensitivity to nuances of language; Mill for his liberal principles; and Marx for his socialist ideals and his general bolshiness.

Frank Jackson: That's a difficult question. I really have three favourite philosophers: Jack Smart, David Armstrong, and David Lewis. David Armstrong taught me when I was a student at Melbourne: he gave wonderful lectures, though I didn't believe much of what he said. I was a colleague of Jack Smart's for a year at Adelaide. And then I met David Lewis who seemed to me, as he did to so many people, to be something quite special: the sort of philosopher who only comes along every 50 or 100 years. If you were putting me on the spot, I'd have to put David Lewis at the top of that list.

Sean Kelly: I'd have to say Aristotle, but I don't read Aristotle in a traditional way. One of the things that I'm interested in in Aristotle is that he has a conception of what he calls the phronimos. The phronimos is something like the master of living a practical life. And what I'm interested in Aristotle's conception of the phronimos is that he thinks that the phronimos cultivates in himself the ability to recognize immediately, without deliberation or thought, what's demanded of him in a situation—and that seems to me a very important skill.

Joshua Knobe: I've always had this admiration for Friedrich Nietzsche. Maybe it was Nietzsche who first got me interested in philosophical questions. What I take from Nietzsche is the idea that we shouldn't simply be interested in understanding how people ordinarily think about certain kinds of questions, but that we should try to look deeper, and in some ways try to question these ordinary views that we have—and maybe rebel against the ways that we have ordinarily been thinking about them.

Chandran Kukathas: My favourite philosopher is David Hume. It's partly a matter of my own biography, since he was the first philosopher that I started working on systematically when I was a master's student many years ago. I find myself attracted to his common-sensical and humane attitude

~~And I find myself attracted to his politics and also to his understanding of morality which is—how shall I put it—not nearly as stoical as the Germans, who are too stoical for me.~~

Nicola Lacey: *I'm not a philosopher. I wrote a biography of a philosopher called H. L. A. Hart, and he engages my great interest as well as admiration. But if you were to ask me a slightly different question—which is: 'if you were a philosopher which philosopher would you really want to immerse yourself in and become expert in it?'—that would be Wittgenstein. To put this in the context of my work in both criminal law theory and on Hart: it's because I see Wittgenstein as analysing philosophical ideas in a way which is much more porous to an historical or a social-scientific approach, because of his idea that concepts find their form and texture within ways of life. That seems to me to invite more of an institutional analysis of criminal law which is what I'm really interested in.*

Melissa Lane: *My favourite philosopher, no surprise from my work, is the ancient Greek philosopher, Plato. And it's because in his thought we see all the fundamental questions of philosophy conjoined. So we see why, in order to think about ethics and politics, we need to think about psychology, about epistemology, about metaphysics—about how all of these questions are connected.*

Brian Leiter: *Oh Fred. Fred Nietzsche. I call him Fred. Well, because he's a great writer, and I think he's more right than wrong about most of the things he has views on.*

Tim Lewens: *I'm going to go for David Hume: because he's just right about most things.*

Guy Longworth: *René Descartes: because he gave us a set of philosophical issues of outstanding importance.*

Catharine MacKinnon: *Oh, the last woman I talked to, whoever she is.*

Simon May: *I would say, my favourite philosopher is Nietzsche. He was my second love, not my first love: sometimes your second love is even stronger than your first love. The reason is that he had the courage to look at the whole of western morality and critique it mercilessly. And I think that's what the job of philosophy is, and not to tinker round the edges or do too much conceptual slicing.*

Jeff McMahan: *My favourite philosopher is Derek Parfit who teaches at Oxford. His work combines imagination and insight and rigour and clarity in a way that's really unprecedented.*

Hugh Mellor: *My favourite philosopher is a fellow Cambridge philosopher, much more eminent and impressive than I am, called Frank Ramsey. He died in 1930, just before his 27th birthday, having created two branches of economics, a branch of mathematics, which was his job officially, and made contributions to metaphysics, to the philosophy of mind, the philosophy of action, the philosophy of language, the philosophy of probability, and decision theory, which have really not been matched since his day.*

Sue Mendus: *My favourite philosopher is John Stuart Mill: because he led a rich political life and worked out his philosophical theories in the political world; he was politically engaged. Although the myth doesn't tell you this, he was a very passionate man and a man with very great concern for those who were less well-off than he was. And I think he also had a sad life and struggled with his own personality, and with his own background. And he triumphed! So he's my favourite.*

John Mikhail: I would mention two: David Hume and Jeremy Bentham. Hume was a phenomenal theorist of mental activity, absolutely exceptional in his subtle descriptions of our mental lives and in posing philosophical problems that have endured. And Bentham is a hero because of his moral and political outlook: the way in which he as a young person was scandalized by the corruption and the immorality around him in society, and set himself to change that, and he was really remarkably effective in doing so.

David Miller: I have two favourite philosophers, Hume and Wittgenstein. What I like about them both is that they've permanently inoculated me against a certain kind of scepticism. This is why, for example, I've never been in the slightest tempted by any form of postmodernism: because if you study these philosophers you'll see at once the self-defeating character of certain forms of sceptical reasoning.

Tariq Modood: My goodness. I've got a number of favourite philosophers. Socrates is a big hero. Probably the philosopher that I've been most influenced by is Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's emphasis that philosophy is not about trying to establish an ideal language like mathematics, and that words are not imprecise—they do exactly what they're meant to do—but what they're meant to do is not necessarily the strain that philosophers put upon them. This emphasis on the fact that meaning lies in use is a very important concept for me. Another very important concept for me is 'family resemblance' because that helps me to understand how in my own field of multiculturalism those who try to get all groups to be like one particular model—of ethnicity or equality, or whatever—are not only pursuing what looks like a politically impossible task, but they're intellectually flawed. They're working with a conception of concepts that Wittgenstein exploded.

A.W. Moore: Kant, partly because of the incredible breadth of his philosophy and also because of something which in a way comes as a surprise in that context, which is the incredible unity of that philosophy.

Stephen Neale: Bertrand Russell. He clarified an aspect of the use of language with his Theory of Descriptions, the full ramifications of which have still not been entirely felt. It's such an important contribution. It's the contribution that Russell himself clung to his entire life: and when he was asked very late in life what was his most important contribution to philosophy, he said the Theory of Descriptions. And I'm inclined to agree.

Susan Neiman: Well, if I can only pick one then I'll pick Kant. He's actually the bravest of anyone. Kant's most important insight is that there's a huge gap between the way the world is and the way the world ought to be, and that both of those have equal value. And one needs to keep both of them constantly in mind. It's an extremely hard stance to take. It's very modern. It means a certain amount of living on the edge, a certain amount of permanent frustration. People tend to go in one direction or the other. Either they say, 'the way the world is, is all there is, and any sort of ideal is an illusion that you ought to grow out of'. Or they project some kind of illusion—this is where you get Stalinism or something similar—and they say, 'the way the world ought to be is the way the world is'. Living with both is extremely hard, and it means that you know that you will never realize entirely the ideals that you believe in. But I think it's the only way of being both honest and hopeful at the same time.

Martha Nussbaum: Well, that's a hard question, but I guess I would say John Stuart Mill, and part of the reason is that when I imagine meeting the great philosophers of the past and talking to them, I immediately imagine their likely reaction of disdain for a woman. And Mill is one of the few—perhaps

*the only—great philosopher of the past who actually thought of women as equals, and I think I could have a very good conversation with him.*

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*Onora O'Neill: Well, I've worked on Immanuel Kant for more years than I'm going to tell you. And think I've developed an unusual and broad reading of Kant's philosophy which is a good deal more sympathetic than some of the caricatures. So go there, it's worth it. Read it. Read some of the lesser works. And, of course I'm not alone in this now. Recent PhDs I've been in contact with cover Kant and environmental ethics, Kant and intellectual property. There's a lot in there when you get into the wider Kant.*

*Philip Pettit: Oh dear, oh dear, you should have given me some notice of that question. I'm a great enthusiast of Hobbes in so far as I think—I wrote a book about this a couple of years ago—that he's the one who first introduced a very important thesis: which is that we are pretty well like other animals except in so far as we chanced upon language. Now Hobbes developed that in the absence of knowledge about evolutionary theory, but I think his views can be reworked consistently with what we know about Darwinian theory. Whether or not they're exactly right, it's such a wonderful idea. But, of course, I hate Hobbes when it comes to his political philosophy. So on that matter, I find Kant more appealing, though Kant in political philosophy troubles me too. I'd have to start mentioning more obscure figures, like Joseph Priestley, Richard Price, in the eighteenth century: these are really my heroes in political thinking.*

*Anne Phillips: My favourite philosopher is Hannah Arendt. I don't really know why, but every time I start a new research project I find myself rereading Hannah Arendt and finding more interesting things about the world. I couldn't summarize her philosophy, but she seems to me to be one of the most original thinkers that there is.*

*Nick Phillipson: My favourite philosopher is still David Hume. There is something enormously sympathetic about David Hume. He is a sceptic, and not a dogmatic sceptic. He is very funny. He writes wonderful letters. And he was a good cook.*

*Hanna Pickard: My favourite philosopher is Hume, because I think he's wonderful to read and he takes emotion seriously, which in my view both moral philosophy and the philosophy of mind have failed to do, to the detriment of our understanding of human nature—and understanding human nature is what I would like philosophy to aim to do.*

*Thomas Pogge: I would have to say Kant. Why? For two reasons: one is that he was just so damn good. Kant is just inexhaustible. And I just love to read Kant, love to follow his thought, and every time I read his work I find new things. So this standard question—what would you take to a desert island if you could only take one book—it would definitely be the first Critique, The Critique of Pure Reason, even though I've read it many times before. The other thing is that I admire Kant's seriousness about philosophy. He was a man who, with regard to his moral philosophy, for example, was just incredibly careful and serious. He thought about moral philosophy as if what he thought really, really mattered and, of course, in the end it turned out that it did, if only over the course of centuries rather than years.*

*Gideon Rosen: Oh, that's a hard question. My children are always asking me 'who's my favourite this' and 'who's my favourite that', and I never have these lists in my head. I've been teaching Hume this week. And as of today, Hume is my favourite philosopher. Hume is a philosopher who was*

bemused by the limits of philosophy. Hume was an abstract thinker of the first order who turned his gaze on ordinary human thought and ordinary human practice and found that under close scrutiny it eats its own tail, it dissolves. But Hume thought that although human beings are rational animals and that this is an aspect of our nature that we should embrace and cannot deny—we are not just rational animals, we are also non-rational human animals—philosophical understanding of human life isn't designed to bring human life into line with philosophy, it's designed to bring philosophy into line with human life.

Paul Russell: Oh, that's a tough question. Can I cheat and have two? Historically, I'm a huge fan of David Hume: it reflects my Scottish background. I admire Hume's clarity and precision and his sense of what are important large issues. The other person I really admire, another prejudice of mine is my supervisor Bernard Williams, who was a hugely influential and important philosopher of the twentieth century. I enormously admire his philosophical ability and insight, his range was terrific, and like Hume I felt he had a great sense for what were significant philosophical problems and issues. He offers a great critical insight into the nature of philosophy itself.

Michael Sandel: The philosopher I've found most challenging and exciting is Hegel. I suppose that in part because Hegel—difficult though he is to understand—raised fundamental questions about the abstract morality of Kant, connecting morality with embodied ethical life. Hegel's challenge to Kant, philosophically for me, is one of the most exciting works in philosophy. So I nominate Hegel.

Philip Schofield My favourite philosopher is Jeremy Bentham. I got a job working at the Bentham project in 1984 and he's kept me fed and watered ever since.

Peter Singer: Henry Sidgwick is my favourite philosopher. He's the least well known of the founding fathers of utilitarianism—Bentham, Mill, and Sidgwick—but he's clearly the best as a philosopher. His masterpiece *The Methods of Ethics* is a wonderfully reasoned book: he thinks of many objections he's scrupulously fair to his opponents. And he argues for what is essentially a utilitarian conclusion though he has to admit that he's not convinced that he's been able to defeat the egoist viewpoint. But there are so many questions that Sidgwick brings up and reasons about in a way that is still relevant and so often still right today that I think he is without peer as a careful, reflective philosopher.

Barry Smith: I guess my opinion has changed over time. Michael Dummett was the first favourite, but as I've grown older, Hume and Wittgenstein get a look in, and for his work on understanding language, Chomsky. If I had to pick one of them, it would be David Hume, the great Scot. I think he had a commanding understanding of every aspect of our lives: how the mind works, how we fit into the world, the nature of morality, our aesthetic judgements, politics. And he was really keen to understand exactly how we work as creatures: how our minds are built and how they are organized. And for that reason he didn't care whether he was called a philosopher or psychologist, or whatever. He just wanted to find things out—and he had a very good attempt at doing that.

Richard Sorabji: I don't really have a permanent favourite because I've changed my mind over time. At the moment, the two philosophers who excite me most are the later Stoics, starting with a Stoic called Panaetius who made moral philosophy very personal and original, and Mahatma Gandhi. But no doubt that's because it's my most recent book.

Hillel Steiner: Oh dear, you didn't forewarn me of this. Boringly, I'm going to have to opt for John Locke. Not merely or, indeed, especially for his political philosophy, which I find myself considerably

*in sympathy with, but more his place in history. He seems to me to have been an exemplary person.*

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*Dan Sterber: Oh, that's a difficult one. I don't think I have one favourite philosopher. What I like in philosophy are precisely the disagreements, the dialogues, the ability to come with quite different points of view and exchange arguments.*

*Robert Stern: Well, it has to be Hegel. Because there's a complexity to the attempt to think through difficult issues and resolve them, which is an underused resource within contemporary philosophy, particularly within contemporary analytical philosophy. Most analytic philosophers have understandably been put off by the style, the language, and one thing and another, and not seen that often Hegel gives you options on the intellectual map that others haven't seen.*

*Galen Strawson: I think it's Immanuel Kant. Every time I hear the words 'The Critique of Pure Reason', I find myself involuntarily salivating. It's an absurd reaction, but it's just true: it's happening right now.*

*Robert Talisse: John Stuart Mill is my favourite philosopher: not because I agree with everything he says but I think that his main works, particularly On Liberty, is one of the most moving, well thought-out, accessible, and rigorously argued pieces of philosophy ever written.*

*Tzvetan Todorov: Maybe my favourite philosopher is Jean-Jacques Rousseau, because he is an extremely multifaceted author, a novelist, a drama writer, an autobiographer, a dreamer, an individualist, a socialist: he was extremely gifted, and probably an unbearable person, but happily enough we have the works.*

*Alex Voorhoeve: I think it would be David Hume. I like his approach as a naturalist, trying to figure out our psychology and where our moral and political judgements come from. I find him tremendously insightful and illuminating, and I'm always surprised at how discovering where your judgements come from can influence your thoughts about whether they're any good.*

*Susan Wolf: Living or dead? Well, Aristotle is the first person who comes to mind. He was wise and humane.*

*Jonathan Wolff: Probably Hume. The reason for this is that he wrote the Treatise of Human Nature when he was 26. And it's got probably thousands of completely original and new ideas in it: it seems to be a miracle that someone of such young years could have thought so much already. And also for his incredible economy of expression: on one page you might get three brilliant arguments. Most philosophers would have been quite satisfied with their life's work if they just produced the ideas on one page of Hume.*

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MARY MARGARET McCABE ON  
**Socrates and the Socratic Method**

David Edmonds: *According to the dictionary, a question is an expression of inquiry that invites a reply. No figure in the history of ideas has been more associated with the question than Socrates—of the founders of western philosophy. He gives his name to a type of investigation through dialogue—the so-called Socratic method. His questions and truth seeking so annoyed the Athenians that he was tried and found guilty of corrupting young minds. His punishment—in 399 BC—was death through drinking hemlock. Professor M. M. McCabe of King’s College London, submitted herself to a rigorous questioning by Philosophy Bites.*

Nigel Warburton: *We’re going to talk about Socratic method; that’s the method of Socrates. But what was Socrates?*

M. M. McCabe: Socrates lived in Athens in the fifth century BC. He was ugly and disreputable to look at, but a striking and compelling character—so much so that when he asked, people answered: he commanded attention all the time from his interlocutors. But this caused some difficulty in Athens because the questions he asked were uncomfortable ones—deep questions about why they did what they did, both individually and collectively—and the Athenians didn’t like that much. They thought that somehow he was responsible for subversive elements in the state and in particular for some of the political difficulties in which Athens was embroiled at the end of the fifth century. So at the age of 70, in 399 BC, Socrates was executed: given hemlock to drink. He left a huge legacy to the rest of western philosophy.

NW: *And part of his legacy is the portrayal of Socrates in Plato’s writing. Plato was one of his pupils and wrote superbly about Socrates.*

MMM: That’s right. There are in fact several different sources for Socrates’ life. There’s a ribald play by Aristophanes, the *Clouds*; there’s some rather hagiographic material by Xenophon; and there are other Socratic works. But the most important Socratic material is the collection of dialogues that Plato wrote in which Socrates was the main speaker: works about his life, his death, and his conversations with those luckless people who were trying to live their ordinary lives when Socrates called them to account.

NW: *But it’s very important that we have these, because Socrates himself didn’t write anything down.*

MMM: He wrote nothing; he was probably too busy talking. He supposed that what we should be doing is all the time asking questions of others and of ourselves about what it is we think, about what we’re doing, and what it is to think about what we’re doing: questions, that is to say, both about matters ethical and about matters epistemological. Let me give you an example: there was an Athenian called Euthyphro who was an expert on religion. Socrates meets him when they are both on their way to court: Socrates to defend himself against the charge of which he was convicted, Euthyphro to prosecute his own father for the manslaughter



of one of his own slaves. Socrates says to Euthyphro: ‘hang on a minute, are you sure you know what you’re doing?’ and Euthyphro says: ‘yes, of course I know what I’m doing, I am an expert’. Socrates’ investigation is in part about whether Euthyphro is right to think that what he’s doing is right. But the most significant thing about his discussion with Euthyphro is his investigation about what it would be to know such a thing, what sorts of claims you make when you say, ‘I know that prosecuting my father is the right thing to do’. So the discussion always works at that double level, both an account of the particular question at hand, and an account of what conditions there would be on answering it.

NW: *This kind of discussion is actually an example of what we call the Socratic method—where Socrates meets somebody, challenges their assumptions, and through asking difficult questions teases out just how little they know.*

MMM: Exactly. What he’s trying to explain to us is not only how little they know but how little they understand about what it would be to know something. What we understand as the Socratic method is this business of continuous questioning; but we need to notice how complex that turns out to be. One has to think about the logic of the Socratic method as well; when he considers somebody’s position in this sort of question and answer, what he is looking at is a collection of views that they hold, rather than investigating some single proposition and working out whether it’s true or false. So Socrates is trying to see how everything that a person believes fits together. You can see how this makes the Socratic method a very complicated and deeply controversial process, because you’re asking people the most extraordinarily impertinent questions about what they really think, and forcing them to face the exceedingly uncomfortable thought that what they think is somehow incoherent or inconsistent, or dismally incomplete.

NW: *And a lot of people found him intensely irritating because of that.*

MMM: Well they killed him; they had had enough of all of this, and so they bumped him off.

NW: *The person engaged in the Socratic method is not a thoughtful individual in a library: he’s someone scrutinizing ideas in the marketplace, talking to people.*

MMM: That’s exactly right; Socrates thinks that you can have a conversation with no holds barred and find things out that way. There’s no suggestion that somehow or other we’re stuck inside our own heads and can’t do things collaboratively or collectively; he doesn’t start from a position of scepticism about whether there are other minds, or suppose that I’m limited to my own subjective experience. Instead, Socrates thinks (or Plato shows us a Socrates who thinks) that these conversations are genuinely collaborative activities, that it is really possible to find things out together. And from our modern perspective we’re inclined to think that’s a bit overstated, that he’s being ironical. People often say about Socrates: ‘Oh, well, he says he wants to talk with his friends, but he doesn’t really mean it, because he knows he’s a clever-clogs and they’re really stupid—all he is really doing is showing them up.’ That seems to me to assume something about the tone of these discussions which may not be there. I think one should read what Plato has him say at face value and take Socrates to think that these question and answer sessions are *mutually* illuminating, both about the question in hand, and about what it would be to answer it.

NW: *Are these conversations good because they lead to knowledge or are they somehow intrinsically good because they're conversations?*

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MMM: The first thing to remember here is that even when the conversations themselves end in impasse, in *aporia*, they don't fail to make any progress at all: often both the reader and the interlocutors find out a great deal en route about how thought and explanation and knowledge ought to work. Then, second, one might reflect a bit on what Socrates might be committed to in asking all of these questions: why it is worth doing at all? Why is this sort of uncomfortable conversation something we should care about, let alone die for? Some think that Socrates' interest in knowledge is practical—that we want to know so that we shall be good at getting things right, making accurate decisions, getting hold of whatever we need or want, arriving at satisfying our best interests. On such an account, Socrates would think that knowledge is worth having for instrumental reasons—for whatever goods it can provide us with, not for any value it might have in itself. But this picture of Socrates as seeking to calculate the best outcome, or to assemble the maximum amount of goods, sits ill, I think, both with the portrait we are given of a man careless of fame and fortune, and with his obsessive questioning, his constant interest in knowledge itself. Instead, the way to think about Socrates is by means of his own dictum—that the unexamined life is not worth living.

NW: *What does Socrates mean when he says the 'unexamined life is not worth living'?*

MMM: First of all think about it as a *life*. What Socrates is asking us to consider is a whole life, not a collection of goods that we might gather together one day or the next. So the focus is away from individual pieces of practical reasoning or the acquisition of particular goods, or even from the amassing of fortune, the searching for fame, and towards something that might have both the continuity and the structure of a life, centred on the person who lives it, rather than the things they acquire along the way. Secondly, think about what might be the objection to the *unexamined* life, or what might be the demand that we examine it. There might be two ways of understanding that demand: that we examine the life; or that we recommend the life of examining itself. If I am right that the Socratic method is as interested in the conditions for knowledge and understanding as it is in the answers to particular ethical questions, then we might conclude that what Socrates is interested in is the life of examining itself. So it would be that process of constant questioning, of making sure that your principles of reasoning and your processes of reasoning are honest and consistent, fit together and are things for which you're willing to be responsible, that characterizes, and even creates, the life that is worth living.

NW: *Does that then mean that all we need to do is go around questioning all the time to lead a good life?*

MMM: It might be depressing, mightn't it? Perhaps you would end up alone and friendless (not to mention the hemlock). And perhaps you would then be someone for whom the lives of others were nothing but the instruments to your own reflection, and the features of the lives that we think are ordinary would be of no account at all—all that would matter would be this sort of austere intellectualism: that would be all there is to life, morality, and everything. This goes down in the tradition as the question of whether the wise man (or the virtuous man) is happy on the rack. But it doesn't follow from what Socrates says about the examined life that

the examination is *all there is* to a life; the examined life could be the central explanation or condition of what makes this a good life, without the examination's being all there is to it. So you can have friends, and love, and even do all sorts of frivolous things, and the life still counts as examined, if indeed you have the examination at its core. Socrates doesn't need to be committed to saying that the wise man is happy on the rack—he just needs to be committed to the view that if you've got two chaps on the rack, one wise and one not wise, the wise one's going to be better off.

NW: *That's really interesting because of this ancient injunction 'know thyself'. You might think the implication is you have to introspect, go into the wilderness, and think about your life away from other people. But for Socrates it's an essentially social activity.*

MMM: That's right. Supposing you try to work out what it is to be reflective; you might think, 'being reflective requires me to wander off into the wilderness, and worry'. I think that Socrates thinks being reflective is having a perspective on what you think that is detached—looking at, reflecting on the things that you think, as it were, from outside. But one of the ways in which you can do that best is in conversation, because what conversations do is to provide you with differences of perspective. And he might think, further, that one of the reasons to care about working out our lives like this, is that doing things together just matters, that social engagement is itself important, both for love and for knowledge.

NW: *Socrates claimed that he had nothing to teach; nevertheless, is there something we can learn from Socrates today?*

MMM: If Socrates thought we'd learnt something he would still not have thought he'd taught us. But I think he was right about something important. It seems to me that if we are involved in education—whether we're being educated or doing the educating, or, best of all, both at once—the Socratic method is a fundamental feature of the whole business. It doesn't constitute the whole of education, but it constitutes something at the core of what we might think education properly is: to discuss with others in this open-minded, open-ended way that allows them to reflect on what they think and us to reflect on what we think, without dictating, without dogma, without insistence, and without imperative. And what the interlocutors are asked to do, if you like, is to be true to themselves: to be sincere about their beliefs and to be honest about how their beliefs fit together and to have some respect for their companion. All of that, I think, is a lesson that we do rightly learn from Socrates.

NW: *What are the implications then for you as somebody inspired by Socrates' teaching within quite a constraining university curriculum?*

MMM: The standard ways that we have of teaching in universities are ways that Socrates wouldn't acknowledge as proper methods of coming to understand. For example, the lecture: it's actually impossible to lecture Socratically, since there is no conversation—Socrates complained all the time about 'long speeches', I think, because they just fail to engage with the other person in the right way. Socrates certainly wouldn't approve of examinations in the contemporary sense, because they suggest that there is a right answer and a wrong answer, and he wouldn't think about things in those terms. Although he doesn't deny that there is truth and falsehood, he thinks that knowledge and understanding don't come piecemeal like that, and are not checked by that kind of test. He wouldn't like bite-sized courses, modules, whatever

one likes to call them. He wouldn't think you can start here and finish there, and get it right ~~about metaphysics, for example—because he thinks that there are no lines of demarcation~~ between one question and another. The Socratic method is demanding and extreme; but we can see that it is a model that one needs to bear in mind all the time. It keeps you honest just a little bit; it stops you from thinking, 'oh yeah it's easy, you know, I can go and give a few lectures and then I've done my job'. That's not what doing your job should look like—especially in philosophy.

NW: *Would you describe yourself as Socratic?*

MMM: I wish I could. I'd like to be. But it's very hard!

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## ANGIE HOBBS ON Plato on Erotic Love

David Edmonds: *The scene: a drinking party, two and a half millennia ago. The revellers: a philosopher, a soldier-politician, a comic poet and a tragedian, a physician, a specialist in law. The subject of their discussion: love. To discuss one of Plato's most famous dialogues, The Symposium, and in particular the nature of erotic love, we spoke to Angie Hobbs, of Sheffield University.*

Nigel Warburton: *The topic we're talking about is Plato on love. We're talking about a specific kind of love, Eros. What does Plato mean by that?*

Angie Hobbs: The term means erotic love, and I've heard it beautifully described as 'whatever makes you tingle'. Traditionally, in Greek literature, erotic love was physical love for someone else's body, but what we're going to see Plato doing throughout his work, particularly in his great dialogue on love, the *Symposium*, is expanding the field of erotic love away from bodies. But the basic meaning of the term is erotic desire for one other human being.

NW: *You've mentioned The Symposium. What was that?*

AH: It's a sumptuous dialogue by Plato. It was written in about 385 BC, but mainly set in 416 BC, and it describes a probably apocryphal symposium, a drinking party, at the house of a tragedian called Agathon. Amongst the guests we have Socrates, the comic poet Aristophanes, a doctor, a student of rhetoric, and—probably the most famous man in Athens of his day—the glamorous, charismatic, general/statesman/bad boy/rock star figure, Alcibiades. And they all give their own views on what they think erotic love is: its definition and origins, its aims and objects, whether it's beneficial or harmful to mankind.

NW: *Let's start with Aristophanes. He's got a powerful speech about the nature of erotic love.*

AH: This is one of my favourite passages in western literature. In keeping with his profession, he gives us this fabulously inventive comic fantasy. Originally, he says, there were three different sexes of proto-human beings (though whether they can even be classed as proto-human is in fact disputed): male, female, and hermaphrodite (a mixture of male and female). And these beings were initially spherical. They were completely round, with four arms, four legs, two heads, two faces, and two sets of genitalia, and they rolled around the surfaces of the earth like acrobats. But this race got very uppity, they got above themselves, and the Greek gods, led by Zeus, wondered what to do about them. If they killed them all off, that would get rid of the threat but they would also lose all the libations and sacrifices. So the gods thought: what we'll do is cut them all in half. In so doing, we'll both weaken them, but also double the number of those offering libations. So Zeus orders Hephaestus—the blacksmith god—to cut these spherical beings in half to form creatures with two arms, two legs, one face, one set of genitalia (initially in the wrong place—we'll come back to this), and they mope around the world looking for their lost other half. And, Aristophanes says, this is

what Eros is: it is the search for your literal other half; it is the desire to be reunited with this other half and thereby achieve your original state. It's the yearning and quest to regain what you've lost.

NW: *That's a powerful metaphor for sexual longing, but even in ancient Greek times it couldn't have been taken to be literally true?*

AH: No, but it's a very compelling way of evoking the notion of erotic desire for one other unique, particular, irreplaceable human being. Except, of course, there is an intriguing question about whether the missing other half is ever actually viewed by the questing lover as a whole human, or just as the lost half of him- or herself, something to be reabsorbed. Plato may be casting a very beady eye on what we now term 'romantic love' and forcing us to ask uncomfortable questions about the extent of egoism involved in this kind of love. And there are also complex questions concerning identity here. But there is no doubt about the fact that the search is a risky and potentially painful process: you may never bump into your other half. And even if you do, they could then die on you, and leave you with no adequate replacement: even if you form another attachment of some kind, you will always lack your other half. So the story conjures up all the longing and the intensity, and the passion of romantic love for one unique particular (whether viewed as a half or as a whole). But it also conjures up the risks and the dangers and the potential enslavement of that love.

NW: *What happens when you do meet up with your other half?*

AH: Well, initially in the myth it's all very frustrating, because the genitalia of these beings are in the wrong place, and they can't physically make love. So Zeus steps in and orders Hephaestus to remedy this: their genitalia are moved around and they can now make physical love. And then what Plato does with this myth gets really interesting, really intriguing. We are asked to imagine that these couples are physically intertwined in bed; they are in the midst of interpenetrative sex and, at this very moment, the blacksmith god, Hephaestus, arrives at their bedside—you would have thought an unwelcome and rather tactless visitor. And, interrupting them, Hephaestus asks: 'What do you really want? Do you want me to weld you together, not just in body, but also in soul, so you become one instead of two?' And they say, 'yes, yes, yes, that's what we want'. And Hephaestus says: 'Think carefully. Is this really, really what you want?' And they say, 'yes, yes, weld us, weld us!' And that's where the myth ends. They're going to be welded together in life—and I believe Hephaestus is envisaging a spiritual as well as a physical welding—and they will also be together in death. But the implication is that Plato, the author of this fantasy, through the character of Aristophanes, is asking us to think very hard about what we think romantic love is, and what we want from it. Because when you are together with your beloved, you can have that very intense physical and spiritual longing to be absolutely fused. But think what would happen if that actually occurred: could erotic love continue to exist? And I think Plato is raising some intriguing questions here, because he's saying: If you're defining love as a search for what you lack, then what happens if this search finds its object? Does erotic love tend towards its own annihilation? Because if you find what you're looking for, you've surely cancelled out the conditions that make erotic love possible. And do you want that? Are you ok with that?

NW: *That's Aristophanes. How does Socrates develop these ideas?*

AH: When it's Socrates' turn to talk, he says he's going to relay a conversation he had when young with a (probably fictional) priestess called Diotima, who—he mischievously says—taught him everything he knows about eroticism: lovely to have Socrates taught by an older woman. In the course of this conversation we are told that love is not love of one's other half, but only of the good: Aristophanes has got love wrong. You don't love something just because it's yours—if you have a toothache you want to get rid of the rotten tooth; you love something or someone because it or they are good.

NW: *So does that mean that lovers are in principle interchangeable for Socrates?*

AH: Yes, they can be. He says that the aim of love is to possess the good forever, which, of course, implies that we want some form of immortality. Now, in the *Symposium* there is no personal immortality available to us. Your particular personal life is going to come to an end when you die. So what we all do—in Freudian terminology, often unconsciously—is to seek various substitute forms of immortality, and Socrates says there are three of these, which he lists in ascending order of importance. First and least—in Socrates' eyes—you can have children; second, you can perform some glorious deed like Achilles, which will win you lasting fame; or third, and best, you can create enduring works of philosophy, literature, bodies of laws and education, and so on.

That's the way of achieving the good forever. But, says Socrates, the way we do any of these things is through a beautiful beloved, a beautiful love object. In the case of physical children, we physically fall in love with a beautiful beloved and use that beloved to create the children. In the case of honour and fame, or works of art and science, we use our love for a beautiful beloved as our inspiration—and in some cases, the education of the beloved is itself the creative work which will survive us. Now these beautiful beloveds, who are the means by which we achieve these various substitutes for immortality, are simply a representation or instantiation of what Diotima calls the Form of Beauty, which is an unchanging, non-sensible, eternal structure or principle—the perfect and transcendent principle of beauty. And every beautiful object in this phenomenal world—animate or inanimate—is simply an inevitably imperfect instantiation of the single form of beauty. The consequence of this is that each of the beloveds with whom we fall in love is individually replaceable. We're not attracted by their unique particularity as Aristophanes thought we were; we're attracted to them solely to the extent that they are a representation of the Form of Beauty and can help us towards our ultimate aim of possessing the good forever.

NW: *So the things that we tend to value most in life in terms of success, achievement, family—all those things are actually driven by a love of beauty?*

AH: Absolutely. To put it precisely: love is the desire to possess the good forever through begetting and bearing offspring by means of beauty. And it's no surprise to me whatsoever that Freud was hugely inspired by this particular speech in the *Symposium*. Freud says, yes, there is this basic stream of erotic energy which may then be channelled and diverted onto different objects. Freud, of course, calls this rechannelling, 'sublimation', and he believes that his theory of libidinal sublimation is profoundly indebted to Plato's theory of erotic rechannelling (though in fact there are also important differences as well as similarities between the two).

NW: *But for Plato love has a metaphysical aspect. It's connected to his whole notion of the Theory of Forms.*

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AH: That's right. So far we've been concentrating on someone falling in love with a particular person, even if the reason they fall in love is only because that particular person instantiates the Form. What we now need to look at is the way Diotima uses this phenomenon of falling in love with an individual beautiful body and claims that, in fact, it's just the first rung of what she calls the ladder of love—and her account of this ladder is one of the most famous, powerful, and disturbing passages in western literature. She says: you start off being physically attracted to one other beautiful body. But then—anticipating the lyrics of Mick Jagger—you realize that the beauty of one body is akin to the beauty of all other bodies, so it's irrational not to be attracted to all of them. Next you come to understand that beauty is instantiated more fully in the soul than in the body, so you now start to fall in love with beautiful souls. And gradually you ascend this ladder which takes you further and further away from particular human bodies towards ever more abstract objects of desire. Because after human souls you turn your attention to human customs and institutions, and then to all the various branches of knowledge; and finally, revealed to you in all its glory at the top of the ladder, is the transcendent 'vision' of the Form of Beauty itself. It is in contemplating this perfect beauty, says Diotima, that life will be truly liveable. Because if you're in love with one beautiful person, you're enslaved to them, you're trapped (and, of course, your beloved could also die, or leave you): it's a painful, vulnerable existence. By contrast, the Form of Beauty is always going to be there for you, eternal and unchanging. But, interestingly, we may note that it's never going to love you back, either. The person dwelling with the Form of Beauty is in a state of bliss—and Plato uses extremely sexual language to describe the revelation of the form of beauty: it's an absolutely climactic vision—but the Form of Beauty, being perfect, is not the kind of entity that can love. As we've seen, in the *Symposium*, love stems from lack. So, in contrast to Christian notions of a loving God, contemplating the Form is a one-way experience. We may even want to ask whether Eros has transformed itself into something else at the very top of the ladder.

NW: *Alcibiades comes in at a certain point and one reading is that Plato illustrates Socrates' conception of Eros by the way Socrates reacts to Alcibiades.*

AH: Yes. It's interesting to look at the language with which Alcibiades' entrance is described. Alcibiades, remember, is this glamorous, charismatic, and ravishingly beautiful man—he was said to be the most physically beautiful person in Athens, male or female. And both males and females were in love with him. The one person who probably wasn't—despite his claims to the contrary—was Socrates. In fact, it was Alcibiades who fell in love with Socrates, turning on its head the normal Athenian upper class convention of the time, whereby an older man would have an erotic affair with a younger male lover in his teens. Anyway, this character, Alcibiades, arrives at our dinner party after Socrates has finished recounting his conversation with Diotima; so he's not heard any of the earlier speeches. He's drunk and supported by an *aulos*-girl—such girls often entertained in more ways than simply playing the *aulos*. He's wearing a wreath of violets and ivy which has tipped over his eye. Plato describes his entrance with the term 'suddenly': exactly the same term that he used of the revelation of the Form of Beauty. So it seems that we have to choose: do we want the Form of Beauty or a particular, beautiful, flawed human being? And when he finds out about the discussion,



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