



Question of the Month



Who Is The Best Philosopher?

The following answers to this essential piece of philosophical gossip each win a signed copy of *The Kingdom of Infinite Space* by Raymond Tallis. In the best philosophical tradition, nobody got more than one unequivocal vote, so nobody is unequivocally the best.

The answer is: an archetype

The best philosopher is not an individual but rather an **archetype**, possessing certain qualifying traits which authentic romancers of wisdom will strive to attain. First, the consummate philosopher must emulate the inquisitional intrepidity of Socrates: they must be fearless in challenging existing ideas and paradigms, even at the risk of the forced consumption of an untherapeutic dose of tasty hemlock. The paragon philosopher must be familiar with many systems of thought, yet identify with no single religion or doctrine: for what are dogmas to a lover of truth but an accumulation of detritus which impedes the quest? Faith is what happens when we lose faith in ourselves, intimates Lao Tzu. Thus the authentic seeker embraces the advice of Kahlil Gibran, and makes his *life* his temple and religion. The ultimate philosopher also understands Jesus' assertion that "the Kingdom of Heaven is within you," and they realize, as did John Milton, that the mind "can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven." On the advice of Confucius, the ideal philosopher seeks not flattery, nor do they shun reprimand: rather, they rejoice in hearing their errors, knowing that the truth is one step closer. They compete with nobody except themselves, espousing Muhammad's maxim that we need only be greater today than we were yesterday. There isn't a care for dominance over others, but only victory over oneself, as Buddha suggested. The supreme philosopher is also not enslaved by longings for wealth or hedonism: "For what good is it to gain the world," asks Jesus, "if we lose our very selves?" Following Bertrand Russell, a Casanova of wisdom is seduced not only by truth but also by beauty and passion. They distinguish between loneliness and aloneness, and like a mystic, are not repulsed by the latter, but enchanted. An existential hazard to the ordinary person, solitude provides the model philosopher adequate time for self-reflection, to fulfil the immortalized Greek axiom *gnothi seauton*, 'know thyself' – because like Socrates, they have accepted that the unexamined life is not worth living.

SHAWN HARTE, DEATH ROW, NEVADA

The answer is: David Hume

Objective selection of 'the best' would require an awareness of all philosophers, an up-to-date acquaintance with their work, and unequivocal criteria for 'best'. Since none of these requirements can be met, one approach is to answer the question by reference to possible criteria, and cite some philosophers who exemplify them. The best philosopher is one who:

- Is discerningly cognizant of the broad field of philosophy, and is capable of insightful analysis of its particular 'bones' – of revealing the bearing that this philosophy has on contempo-

rary problems. Simon Blackburn's book *Think* (1999) is a instance in which he persuasively demonstrates these qualities;

- They draw rationally, impartially and critically upon understanding stemming from both the empirical sciences and the arts. The works *Memory* and *Imagination* published by Mary Warnock provides convincing instances of this capacity;

- Via whatever medium, they communicate clearly, cogently and effectively, both with peers and the interested public, in engaging, ingenuous and good-humoured ways. The broadcasts and writing of contemporary philosopher Anthony Grayling seem clearly to possess these merits;

- They are able to anticipate and address significant areas in need of philosophical enquiry, in open-minded, challenging ways. Peter Singer's work on bioethics deals with acutely controversial matters facing contemporary society;

- They are in pursuit of the philosophical enterprise, including repudiating earlier conclusions when no longer tenable. Wittgenstein's significant shift from a 'picture theory' of language to a 'tool theory' is a striking, enlightening instance;

- They have made contributions to the subject which transform understanding and persist in their relevance. Plato is the supreme example – so much so that, as we are frequently reminded, the history of Western philosophy is a series of footnotes to his work. Though not as 'supreme', Leibniz's exposition of the distinction between 'analytic' and 'synthetic' statements nonetheless has continuing implications. Mention of this also brings to mind the profoundly influential first *Critique* of Immanuel Kant, wherein the relationships between these apparently distinct kinds of propositions are extensively and penetratingly explored.

But to the extent that a conclusion is possible, **David Hume** has been regarded as the greatest of all British philosophers, and, like Grayling, was valued for his geniality. According to his friend Adam Smith, Hume came "as near perfection as any human being possibly could," and was acknowledged by Kant as instrumental in rousing him from his "dogmatic slumber."

COLIN BROOKES, WOODHOUSE EAVES, LEICESTERSHIRE

The answer is: Thomas Malthus

The best philosopher has to be the one who most completely addresses our circumstances. Accordingly I propose the clergyman and economist, **Thomas Malthus** (1766-1834).

Malthus said, "the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man." (*An Essay on the Principle of Population*, 1798, p5.) In the face of this, and looking at the present turmoil, where hungry people are on the streets rocking governments, don't tell me Malthus is

not important. He encapsulates our present and puts before all of us the twin decisions of how long we will live, and how.

Malthus has taken quite a bashing over the years, partly for technical reasons – for example, he badly underestimated the capacity of agriculture to make gains in productivity. His subject matter and style of presentation were also seen by many as objectionable. I live in a village not three miles from Albury in Surrey where he was appointed curate in 1797. I frequent the same ale-houses where, he claimed, the ‘labouring poor’ squandered any contributions they received (through the Poor Law) from the rich. Little wonder that Malthus has been sidelined and seen as politically incorrect. Yet Darwin admitted that this man was his inspiration for *On the Origin of Species*.

For Malthus ‘substance’ was the key to supporting population; “want was the goad that drove the Scythian shepherds from their native haunts...” The link of this historical flashback to the circumstances of today is striking. Only last week, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees pointed out that soaring food prices and the effects of global warming were driving ever more people from their homes, and that Europe was the ‘favoured destination’ for asylum seekers (*FT*, 18 June, 2008).

Malthus is a thinker for our time: although terror keeps us on our toes, population growth is the one to watch. But now, like Europe, I am running out of space.

JOHN CROSTHWAITE, GUILDFORD, SURREY

The answer is: John Stuart Mill

There can be little argument: **John Stuart Mill**. But he won't receive strong support. Many have criticised Mill's philosophy, but in it, and in his life, he gave us more than any other thinker. He even provided an overarching answer to the question ‘How can we best lead our lives?’ Mill gave us the pursuit of happiness and the avoidance of pain. In the century since, philosophers building on his ideas (Frankena, Beauchamp and Childress, and others) have emphasised the prevention of harm (rather than pain) even more than the creation of happiness, which was what Mill focused on. For happiness we are still searching – we are no further ahead than Mill.

The criticisms come from renowned sources – Bernard Williams, John Rawls, Martha Nussbaum are some. But every criticism can be refuted by statements found in Mill's works. Merely to maximise happiness is wrong, they claim – fostering evils such as sadism, or otherwise committing a wrong to gain happiness. They are misreading Mill, however, for his words are crystal clear: “The moral rules which forbid mankind to hurt one another... (which include wrongful interference with each others' freedom) are more important to human well-being than any maxims [eg utilitarian ones].” Most critics write as though Mill never made this statement. Yet Mill put preventing harm at the highest level – overriding happiness. His *On Liberty* gives us the powerful guideline, “The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community... is to prevent harm to others.” This is where Rawls and Nussbaum depart from Mill.

Critics also claim that utilitarianism does not distinguish between individuals sufficiently – that the good of the majority can override that of a minority. Certainly it can – but not if the

good of the majority harms another, or inflicts an injustice. Rules of justice “concern the essentials of human well-being more nearly, and therefore are of more absolute obligation, than any other rules for the guidance of life,” Mill said.

But Mill's values are not only in his written words, they were built into his personal life: shown in his campaign against slavery; his support for the French revolution; his defence of human rights; his work as a parliamentarian and university rector, and his love of Harriet Taylor, to whom he gave credit for much of his thinking. The two of them were among the earliest advocates of women's rights. They lived in Avignon, where she died after too short a marriage. He now lies beside her.

DR PETER BOWDEN, PHILOSOPHY DEPT, UNIV. OF SYDNEY

The answer is: Confucius

Who is the best philosopher? Though I have little enthusiasm for utilitarianism, this question calls for a response similar to a utilitarian ethical calculation: the best philosopher is the one whose legacy has had the greatest positive influence upon the lives of the most people. That philosopher is **Confucius**.

The ethics of *K'ung Ch'iu* or *K'ung Fu-tzu* are both social and political. He was the editor/author of the *Five Classics*, and his seminal work, the *Analects*, has been far more influential than Daoism, Legalism, or Mohism (a Chinese utilitarian philosophy which anticipated Bentham and Mill more than 2000 years ago). Jesuit translations introduced Confucius to Europe and were important to the Enlightenment.

In the *Analects*, Confucius employs dialogue nearly a century before Socrates and Plato. His theories of familial loyalty and ancestor worship are the basis for ideal government, and evolve from three concepts. *Li* is ethical action, which arises from natural law and not from traditional ceremony. *Yi* arises from social reciprocity. *Ren* translates as empathy and responsibility toward others. These are condensed as the Golden Rule [‘Do unto others...’], or, expressed in the negative, the Silver Rule – one should not impose upon another what one would not choose for oneself. Virtuous government will follow when thoughts, words and actions are dedicated to Truth.

For 2,500 years Confucianism has influenced individual behavior and shaped political institutions in China, Japan, Korea and Southeast Asia. From the fall of the Roman Empire to the Tudor Dynasty, China was by any measure the world's most advanced civilization, and it is the oldest continuing civilization. The past 400 years have been a struggle for it, but the dragon has awakened. Let us hope that it has read Confucius.

JAMES W. WILLIAMS, ELIZABETH CITY, NORTH CAROLINA

The answer is: Pythagoras

By what criteria does one judge this? The philosopher with the most influence through history? The philosopher who made the greatest contribution to ethics or to epistemology? The philosopher who provided the best answers to all the big questions? I'm not sure there is a ‘best philosopher’, because philosophy is not a competition like the Olympics. But I will settle for **Pythagoras**, because I believe he really has had the biggest influence historically, and because he was a true polymath, even though all evidence of his teachings, his discoveries and his ‘school’ are second-hand at best.

Pythagoras' most outstanding discovery was not the triangle proof that bears his name, but the realisation that musical pitches have mathematical relationships. But the real legacy of Pythagoras' philosophy was another, not unrelated, revelation. Mathematics had been used by various cultures for the purposes of commerce and accounting, as well as for measurements, and in geometry for construction; but it was Pythagoras who appreciated that mathematics was an inherent aspect of the natural world and could provide answers to the mysteries of nature, including astronomy. This paradigm is still with us, and has arguably driven science since the time of the Renaissance.

The connection is through Plato, and consequently, Aristotle. According to Kitty Ferguson, author of *The Music of Pythagoras*, Plato actively sought out Pythagoras' most accomplished student, Archytas of Tarentum. Then, back in Athens, Plato set up his famous 'Academy' using a 'Pythagorean curriculum' he adopted from Archytas. It was known as the *quadrivium* of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music.

There is no doubt that Plato's Pythagorean curriculum and its influence on Aristotle paved the way for the paradigm of mathematical scientific enquiry which eventually led to Newton's theory of gravity, Maxwell's equations, thermodynamics, Einstein's theories of relativity, quantum mechanics and chaos theory, with all the technological spin-offs of this – flight, space travel, computers, and the diverse engineering marvels we embrace in the modern age. Thus I would argue that historically Pythagoras is the most important philosopher in the pantheon, and that makes him eligible for the best.

PAUL P. MEALING, IVANHOE, VICTORIA

The answer is: George Berkeley

There is no accepted standard by which philosophers can be compared. We can only speak about those philosophers we have studied and make choices in accordance with the influence exerted on us. Thus my choice is **George Berkeley** (1685-1753), on the basis of Berkeley's clarity, methodology and courage.

Berkeley conceived his philosophy as a young man. He published *An Essay Towards A New Theory of Vision* ('Theory') in 1709, aged 24, and his major work *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* ('Principles') a year later. He was an empiricist, believing that philosophy must be based on experience. He was also the father of Western idealism, believing that the fundamental nature of all is mental, consisting of *ideas*.

In the *Theory*, Berkeley critically examined the sense of vision, rejecting then-current theories. Everything we see, remote or near, small or large, including our own bodies, consists of sensations, which are ideas (and also for the other four senses). Strictly speaking, visual sensation consists only of colours, shades, brightness. We use our other senses, in particular touch, to interpret these sights. (By 'touch' is meant not only on the surface of the skin, but all sensations of the body.) From birth to adulthood, by means of language we learn to develop and accept the conventional self-world view, which is exceedingly difficult to unlearn. Modern cognitive science has confirmed many of Berkeley's views. Berkeley was nearly 300 years ahead of his time.

In the *Principles*, using the insights developed in the *Theory*, Berkeley demonstrated that 'matter' is an unjustified concept, that the universal essence is perception – *esse est percipi*: to be is to be perceived. This has also been a very influential idea.

HANS HEIMER, SALE, CHESHIRE

The answer is: Carl Sagan

I believe **Carl Sagan** was the greatest philosopher. He wasn't a philosopher by trade, he was an astronomer; but he spent his life asking deeply philosophical questions, and he has had an incredible impact on humanity. He popularized questions about the origin and fate of the universe, our species, intelligence and religion, and the possibilities of life elsewhere. At least 500 million people watched his *Cosmos* TV mini series, and countless have been inspired by him. He was a relentless defender of reason and science during his life, and he opened the eyes of millions of people to the wonder and grandeur of the universe, showing how absurd the quarrels and altercations of humanity are when compared with the almost 14-billion-year history of the universe and its vast, perhaps infinite, size. When the US and the USSR were embroiled in the Cold War, Carl Sagan warned of the dangers and stupidity of nuclear war and taught that a far better use of our lives would be to work together to understand the universe, ourselves and our place in it, and anyone else who might be out there. Because of him I always keep a few deep space photographs in my room, so that any time I start getting cocky I can look at them and remember that all of human history has happened on a speck of dust in the blink of an eye. Let him speak for himself: "We live on a hunk of rock and metal that circles a humdrum star that is one of 400 billion other stars that make up the Milky Way Galaxy, which is one of billions of other galaxies which make up the universe – which may be one of a very large number, perhaps an infinite number, of other universes. That is a perspective on human life and our culture that is well worth pondering."

BARRET WESSEL, ELKRIDGE, MD

The answer is: Richard Rorty

Who is the greatest philosopher? For a farmer's grandson who tried to keep his feet planted firmly on the ground, it has to be the infamous pragmatist **Richard Rorty** (1931-2007). He was something of a pariah in mainstream philosophical circles, but as a gay Christian socialist/social democrat who has never fitted into a tidy box, Rorty's avant-garde approach to ivory tower academia fits me like a glove.

G. Elijah Dann (*After Rorty: the Possibilities for Ethics and Religious Belief*, Continuum, 2006) takes Rorty's writings seriously, showing how he helps to enhance and enliven both the philosophy of religion and the chances for moral progress. Rorty's amazing string of books includes *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979).

If Rorty did not actually consider philosophy nonsense, he thought there were better things philosophers might do with their time than teach Philosophy. On the academic level, Rorty left the field to others. By publicly becoming a sceptic – just as I became a fighter for gay dignity when responding to a vulgar teaching assistant in the history classroom – his philosophy community shunned him – just as the Amish in Pennsylvania

Crossword No.24 Solution

(See page 29 for the clues)

would be instructed by their Bishop to shun a non-believer in their midst. Such is the rigid orthodoxy in philosophy! “The professionalization of philosophy, its transformation into an academic discipline, was a necessary evil. But it has encouraged attempts to make philosophy into an autonomous quasi-science. These attempts should be resisted. The more philosophy interacts with other human activities – not just natural science, but art, literature, religion and politics – the more relevant to cultural politics it becomes and thus the more useful.” Richard Rorty.

RON WELKER, NORTH WATERLOO, ONTARIO

The answer is: Heraclitus

If ‘philosophy’ means ‘the love of wisdom’, then the Best Philosopher is the person who loves wisdom best. But let us be clear that wisdom refers not to a storehouse of facts. If one wants answers, one should take care to avoid the true philosopher, for they are no provider of solutions. The true philosopher sees the world as something to be explained, but is aware also that we cannot give that sought-after final explanation: every answer submits to another question, truth is always beyond us. The true philosopher is also a visionary; one who sees possibilities, discovers new questions where answers have been placed. But the philosopher’s vision isn’t merely polemical, skeptical, or sophistical, aiming only to undermine and overturn: the philosophical vision involves being able to see the validity of opposing conclusions drawn from the same argument. So the philosophical vision is by nature paradoxical. The philosopher does not lead an argument, but follows it, and does not choose one way or the other on this journey, but transcends them both, setting forth heavy-headed down both paths, and recognizing that “the way up and the way down are one and the same.” The moment a thinker chooses one path, one direction, over another, philosophizing ceases, and the thinker falls into dogmatic slumber. The greatness of the true philosopher is not solely the possession of such vision, however. The ability to help others see with philosophical eyes is the other mark of wisdom. And there has been one thinker who kept under his gaze both thesis and antithesis, attracted not by either, but by both, and who has helped us to see this fluxed-up world through the lens of his words: **Heraclitus**.

WILLIAM J. GRANT, LOWER SACKVILLE, NOVA SCOTIA

The answer is: Me!

First we must establish what should be meant by best. As Plato asserted in the *Phaedrus*, the most worthy object of *eros* (desire) is knowledge. But to judge someone’s degree of success in claiming ultimate knowledge we need a standard of knowledge. This can only be the truth embodied in reality. Yet here we have a problem encountered by any correspondence theory of truth: although we share a belief in an external reality, this reality can seemingly never be ultimately accessed, because we can only assess our beliefs about it by their coherence with each other.

Can any system of philosophy convince us that this is *how things stand*, such that we can thenceforth live according to that system – and see the world as we imagine (or kid ourselves)

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that philosopher saw it too? Surely this would be too much like searching for a golden needle in the haystack of philosophers, when we do not even know the needle exists. It is surely the normal experience that, though a philosopher may succeed in drawing us into their conceptual universe, when we leave the book this Lego castle fades away. The sense of futility is reinforced by the consideration that every system of philosophy is fundamentally at odds with every other one. This is why it’s claimed that unlike science, philosophy never really progresses.

Yet there is a sense in which we are *all* philosophers, as Antonio Gramsci proclaimed, because we all have a philosophy according to which we attempt to make sense of life. We will measure any other proposed system of philosophy according to this. And even though our understanding may be dull or confused, surely any individual has a superior understanding of life as *they* know it when compared with any imposed system. I therefore suggest that **I am the best philosopher**, and that any other philosophical person should believe the same about themselves.

ANDREA WADDELL, BRIGHTON, UK

In honour of this issue’s utopian theme, the next question is: **What would make the best society?** Plans should be drawn up in less than 400 words. The prize is a random book from our book mountain. Subject lines or envelopes should be marked ‘Question of the Month’, and must be received by 22nd February. If you want the chance of getting a book, please include your physical address. You will be edited, and submission implies permission to reproduce your answer physically and electronically.