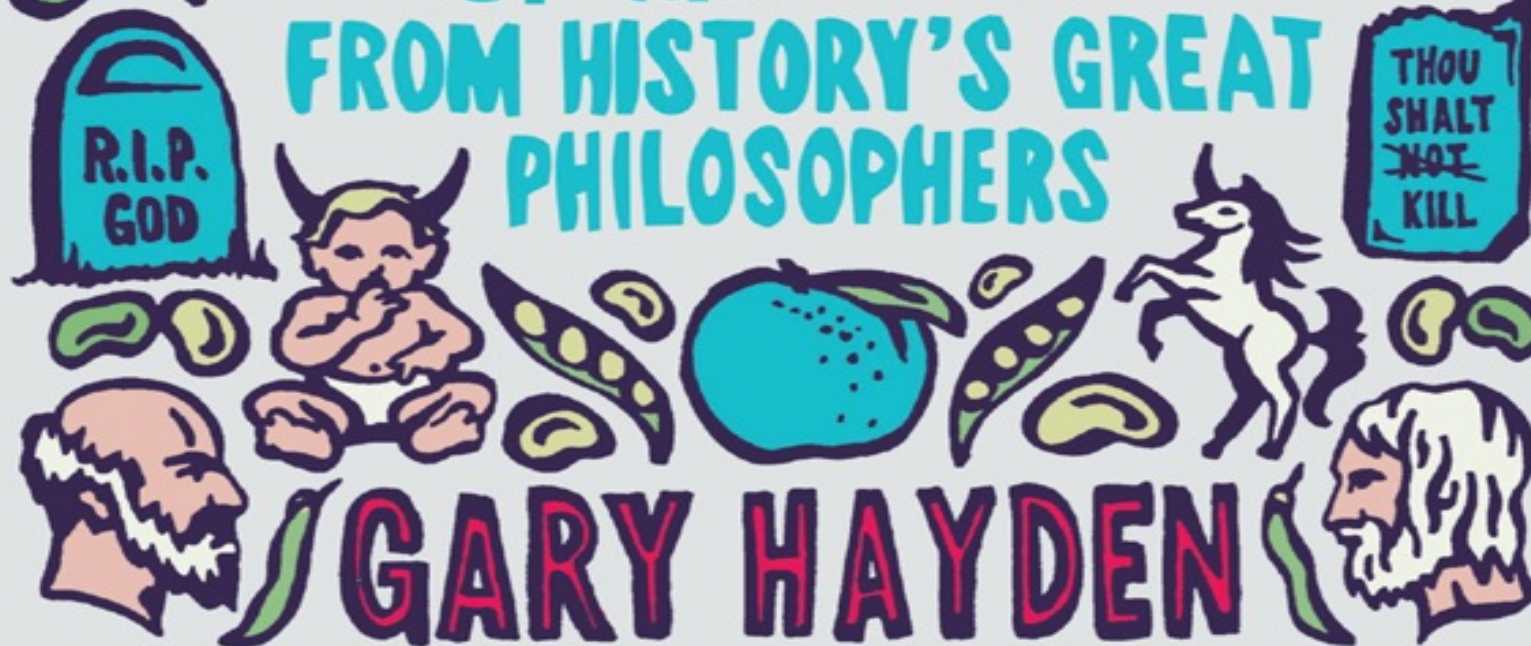




# YOU KANT MAKE IT UP!



STRANGE IDEAS  
FROM HISTORY'S GREAT  
PHILOSOPHERS



GARY HAYDEN

## YOU KANT MAKE IT UP!

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“A tasty smorgasbord of problems, which belie their apparent simplicity by getting to the heart of what it is to reflect on the world philosophically.”

**Martin Cohen**, author of *101 Philosophy Problems*

“Lively and entertaining. It shows some great philosophers at their weirdest and wonderful best.”

**Peter Cave**, author of *Can A Robot Be Human?*

“A delightful read. Fun and informative.”

**William Irwin**, Professor of Philosophy, King's College Pennsylvania

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Gary Hayden** is a journalist and popular philosopher. He has a master's degree in philosophy and has written for *The Times Educational Supplement* and numerous magazines. He is the author of *This Book Does Not Exist: Adventures in the Paradoxical*.

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# You Kant Make It Up

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Strange Ideas from History's Great Philosophers

Gary Hayden



ONE WORLD

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*This book is dedicated to my Dad*

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# CONTENTS

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## Introduction

1. Not *bad*. Just misguided
2. Couldn't be better
3. Couldn't be worse
4. Selfish motives
5. Nothing changes
6. Nothing stays the same
7. Total perfection
8. The real world
9. Oranges aren't orange
10. Cosmic comeuppance
11. It's all in the numbers
12. Dan Brown vs. Shakespeare
13. Burn, baby, burn
14. Again, and again, and again . . .
15. All in the mind
16. Now I remember
17. Gambling on God
18. The ghost in the machine
19. How did that happen?
20. Leibniz's fantastic fairytale
21. Ouch! I feel good
22. You can't predict the future
23. An end to suffering
24. The weaker sex?
25. Selfishness is a virtue
26. One hand clapping
27. Thou shalt kill
28. The brain in the jar
29. Harry Potter exists
30. No one's to blame
31. Duty calls!
32. Mind your behaviour
33. Body-swapping
34. Cannibal conundrums
35. Philosophy? Nonsense!
36. World 3
37. Nothing to discuss
38. R.I.P. God

39. The ultimate vice
  40. Rules . . . rules . . . rules . . .
  41. Absurd, but true
  42. Scientifically unproven
  43. The unexamined life
- 

Further reading

Index



‘One cannot conceive anything so strange and so implausible that it has not already been said by one philosopher or another.’

---

René Descartes

# INTRODUCTION

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Philosophers are clever folk. Some of them outrageously so. Yet they say the strangest things!

Take the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz. He designed calculating machines; invented calculus independently of Isaac Newton; and made important contributions in physics, logic, history, librarianship and theology. He could hardly have *been* any cleverer. Yet he claimed that objects don't really have shapes and sizes; and that the world couldn't possibly be any better than it is.

Or consider the French philosopher, Blaise Pascal. He did groundbreaking work in vacuum physics; invented the syringe; gave the world 'Pascal's Triangle'; and was one of the founders of probability theory. Yet he said that you ought to believe in God even if you doubt His existence.

## Why so strange?

Philosophy abounds with strange ideas. As you read this book, you'll discover that history's deepest thinkers have claimed that matter doesn't exist; that unicorns *do* exist; that babies deserve Hell; and that your mind doesn't influence your behaviour.

But why? What is it about philosophy that gives rise to so much weirdness? And how is it that such brilliant people can say such outrageous things? Is it because genius and craziness are so closely linked? Or is there some other reason?

Well, perhaps the main reason for all the weirdness lies in the nature of philosophy itself. Philosophy concerns itself with ultimate questions. This means that philosophers sometimes find themselves operating at the very limits of thought; at the very edge of what is thinkable. And this can be a very strange place.

Think of those cutting-edge physicists who try to figure out what goes on at the quantum level or at the centre of a black hole. They paint a picture of a world very much at odds with the world of common sense. A world where space and time get warped; where fundamental particles pop into and out of existence; and where multiple universes spring into being.

Philosophers are a bit like that. They too ask deep and difficult questions. The kinds of questions that stretch the understanding to its limits – and beyond. *How are minds related to bodies? Can we ever be absolutely certain of anything? What, if anything, is the point of life? What makes some actions 'right' and others 'wrong'? If there's a God, what kind of being must God be?*

In investigating these questions, philosophers take themselves outside the ordinary trammels of thought. So it is hardly surprising that they come up with some very strange-sounding ideas.

## Ways of being weird

The ideas in this book are all strange. But they're strange in a variety of ways. Some of them, like John Locke's claim that oranges aren't orange, seem plainly wrong. Others, like St Thomas Aquinas's insistence that masturbation is worse than rape, are deeply shocking. Still others, like Pythagoras's

claim that ‘everything is number’, don’t even seem to make sense.

Some of the ideas seem strange when you first encounter them but not so strange once you stop and think about them. A number were considered outrageous when they were first proposed, but have since become quite mainstream (amongst philosophers, at any rate). All of which brings us to an important point . . .

## Strange but true?

*Strange* ideas aren’t necessarily *wrong* ideas.

As you read this book you’ll come across ideas that will surprise you, amuse you, offend you and confuse you. But you’ll also come across ideas that will convince you. Sometimes you’ll find yourself nodding in agreement, and accepting ideas you never thought you *could* accept.

So be warned. A couple of hundred pages from now you may have acquired a firm belief that oranges aren’t orange; that matter doesn’t exist; that Harry Potter *does* exist; and that this isn’t the real world.

## Using this book

I’ve arranged this book into forty-three self-contained chapters, each one dealing with a single idea. The topics covered include ethics, logic, politics, metaphysics, psychology, sex and religion. On balance, it’s probably best to read the chapters in order, and allow yourself time for reflection between each one. But that’s not essential. There’s nothing to stop you from hopping around, or reading the whole book in one splurge, if you prefer.

I’ve begun each chapter by introducing a strange idea and then giving some of the arguments that a famous philosopher has advanced in its favour. Wherever possible, I’ve done that in a way that’s fairly sympathetic to the philosopher’s views. After that, I’ve generally offered some criticisms; some arguments that cast doubt on the philosopher’s idea. Overall, I’ve tried to stay impartial so that you can decide for yourself what you make of it all.

At the end of each chapter I’ve provided pointers to related chapters. These are for the benefit of those of you who like to hop around where your interests lead you. At the end of the book I’ve offered some suggestions for further reading. So if you find a particular philosopher or a particular idea especially interesting, you’ll be able to find out more.

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## NOT BAD. JUST MISGUIDED

The Greek philosopher Socrates (c.469–399 BC) placed great faith in the power of human reason. He believed that reason, properly cultivated, will make us virtuous and happy; that once we truly know what is good we will do it; and that anyone who acts wrongly does so only through ignorance.

The sceptics among us might well wonder what planet Socrates was living on. We know from bitter experience just how impotent reason can be, and what an immense gulf there is between knowing what's right and actually doing it.

### The voice of reason

Of course, we wouldn't expect a philosopher of Socrates' stature to make such an outrageous sounding claim without having his reasons. And, indeed, he did have his reasons. His supporting argument runs as follows.

We are all *hedonists*. That is, everything we do is prompted by the desire to experience pleasure and to avoid pain. This means that all talk of 'good' and 'bad' ultimately boils down to considerations of pleasure and pain. Whatever leads to pleasure we call 'good'; and whatever leads to pain we call 'bad'.

Clearly, no one knowingly chooses pain over pleasure. But this is equivalent to saying that no one knowingly chooses the bad over the good (since the terms are interchangeable). Therefore, anyone who *does* choose the bad in preference to the good must do so in error: because he mistakes it for the good.

Sound reasoners, then, will always do what is good for *themselves*. But will their wisdom also make them virtuous? Will it lead them to treat *others* well too? Socrates thought so. Here's why. Acting unjustly, he said, is harmful not only to those we wrong but also to ourselves. When we act unjustly we damage our own souls. So doing what is right toward others is doing the right thing for ourselves too.

### The voice of experience

Socrates claimed, then, that when we truly know what is good we will do it; that knowledge is virtue. The obvious rejoinder is that his argument cannot be sound since its conclusion is palpably false. People *do* very often choose the bad – even when they know it to be bad.

For example, a morbidly obese person may be in no doubt that his high-fat, high-sugar diet is ruining his health, making him unattractive and damaging his self-esteem. But his knowledge is impotent. Time after time, he finds himself knowingly choosing the bad in preference to the good.

# Socrates' response

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Socrates anticipated this objection. He said: '[Most people] suppose that though present in a man, knowledge is often not knowledge but something else is in control – now high spirits, now pleasure, now pain, now sometimes sexual desire, and often fear.'

But, he insisted, the problem in such cases is not that knowledge is impotent, but rather that what appears to be knowledge isn't really knowledge at all. Anyone who chooses a wrong course of action does so only because he is not truly convinced that it *is* the wrong course of action.

How could Socrates know this? Well, because we are all hedonists and will therefore always choose the greatest quantity of pleasure and the least quantity of pain – *provided we do our calculations correctly*. It is simply absurd to suppose that anyone will knowingly choose the lesser pleasure or the greater pain. Therefore wrong choices simply *must* be the result of miscalculation.

If the morbidly obese man truly understood the nature of his choice, and was skilful enough at calculating its consequences, he would choose the seafood salad in preference to the burger and chips every time.

## No true Scotsman

Socrates here seems guilty of using the No-True-Scotsman Move: an intellectual dodge designed to protect one's claims from being falsified by counter-example. The No-True-Scotsman Move was identified and labelled by the British philosopher Antony Flew (1923–2010) in his 1977 book *Thinking Straight*. A simple example goes like this:

John: No Scotsman puts sugar on his porridge.

Jane: But Angus McSporrans a Scotsman, and *he* puts sugar on his porridge.

John: Maybe so. But no *true* Scotsman puts sugar on his porridge!

Isn't this pretty much what Socrates does?

Socrates: Anyone who knows the good will choose it.

Phaedo: But Jonathan McGreedy knows the good, and he doesn't choose it.

Socrates: Ah, but if he *truly* knew the good he would certainly choose it.

21. OUCH! I FEEL GOOD



30. NO ONE'S TO BLAME



43. THE UNEXAMINED LIFE



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## COULDN'T BE BETTER

Any reasonable person must concede that in many respects the world is a bit rubbish. Joy and beauty there may be; but there is also ugliness, anguish and pain. This poses a problem for *theists* (those who believe in an all-powerful, all-knowing, wholly benevolent God) since if God is all He's cracked up to be, why has He created such a second-rate world?

The German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716), a theist through and through, was acutely aware of this problem and addressed it in his 1710 work, the *Theodicy*. He presented the anti-theist's challenge along the following lines:

1. If God were all-powerful, all-knowing and wholly benevolent then He would create the best of all possible worlds.
2. But this is no way the best of all possible worlds.
3. Therefore God isn't all-powerful, all-knowing and wholly benevolent.

### Possible worlds

What is meant by all this talk of 'possible worlds'? Well, there are an infinite number of ways the world might conceivably have been. Each of these worlds is possible, and therefore God might have created it, provided that it is logically consistent. (Not even an all-powerful God can create a logical *inconsistent* world: for example, one in which two plus two equals five; or one identical to ours in every respect, including pig-physiology and the laws of physics, in which pigs fly.)

One way to think about this is to visualise some of the ways our world might have been. For example, this book might have had an extra chapter; the 2010 Haiti earthquake might never have happened; pigs might fly; and so on. These worlds of the imagination are all (provided they pass the test of logical consistency) possible worlds. In addition, there are any number of possible worlds so different from ours that the imagination balks at them.

### Best possible world

Having cleared that up, we can now examine Leibniz's response to the anti-theistic argument stated above. God's reputation survives unscathed, Leibniz said, because this world, the one we inhabit, is the most perfect there can be. This *is* the best of all possible worlds!

This seems outrageous. Can Leibniz seriously have claimed that no world could possibly be any better than this one? How about a world with less pain, disease and suffering? How about, to take a specific example, a world in which a 2010 earthquake doesn't lead to hundreds of thousands of deaths and untold misery in Haiti?

In the *Theodicy*, Leibniz responded to this objection in two ways. First, he pointed out that although we can conceive, easily enough, of individual aspects of the world that might be improved, we are incapable of judging what the knock-on effects might be. Changes that appear to be for the better may, in fact, make things worse overall. God, on the other hand, sees everything, and, taking everything into account, creates the world with the highest possible ratio of good to bad.

Take mankind's capacity to do evil, for example. There's no doubt that this is the cause of much misery and suffering. God could, it seems, have created a world without moral evil but only by depriving us of free will. And since free will is, in Leibniz's view, a superlative good, such a world would be inferior to the world we inhabit.

Second, Leibniz said that the standards we use to judge the merits of possible worlds are too parochial. We tend to judge purely in terms of human happiness whereas God applies other, richer criteria. One of Leibniz's suggestions is that from God's perspective the best possible world would be the one in which the maximum variety of phenomena are produced by the simplest set of natural laws.

Fair enough. Let's allow that for argument's sake. But even so, how could Leibniz be sure that *this* world, with its precise ratio of phenomena and laws, and its precise admixture of good and evil, is the best there can possibly be?

## ***This must be the best***

This is his reply: 'I do not believe that a world without evil, preferable in order to ours, is possible otherwise it would have been preferred. It is necessary to believe that the mixture of evil has produced the greatest possible good: otherwise the evil would not have been permitted.'

In other words:

1. If God were all-powerful, all-knowing and wholly benevolent then he would create the best of all possible worlds.
2. But God *is* all-powerful, all-knowing and wholly benevolent.
3. Therefore this *is* the best of all possible worlds.

Leibniz turned the anti-theistic argument on its head: a piece of metaphysical manoeuvring so audacious that it brings to mind the story of the girl who murdered her parents and then asked the judge to have pity on a poor orphan.

**3. COULDN'T BE WORSE**



**20. LEIBNIZ'S FANTASTIC FAIRYTALE**



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## COULDN'T BE WORSE

The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) is one of the gloomiest, most curmudgeonly thinkers of all time. His philosophy is uncompromisingly bleak and depressing. Yet for all that, he is tremendous fun to read. Unlike his fellow countrymen, Kant and Hegel, he wrote beautifully; and he had a wonderful – albeit wickedly sarcastic – sense of humour.

### Pain and boredom

Schopenhauer saw human life as a pendulum swinging back and forth between pain and boredom. We spend our lives craving things (wealth, status, artistic achievement, love, etc.) and suffer the agony of unfilled desire until we attain them. But when we finally do attain them they lose their lustre. We quickly become bored with the very things we once craved.

‘[The will’s] desires are unlimited,’ he wrote, ‘its claims inexhaustible, and every satisfied desire gives birth to a new one. No possible satisfaction in the world could suffice to still its craving, set a final goal to its demands, and fill the bottomless pit of its heart.’

### The world as will

Schopenhauer claimed that the entire phenomenal world (the world as it appears to the senses) is a manifestation of will. What does this mean? Well, here’s the gist of the idea.

We can know and understand our own actions in two different ways:

1. like any other phenomena, in terms of cause and effect;
2. more immediately, as acts of will explicable by motives.

Now, just as my bodily actions are manifestations of *my will*, in the same way all other phenomena are manifestations of *will in general*.

Will is thus the grounding of all things. Ultimately, everything is an expression of the universal will. But unlike my will, which is driven by motives, will in general has no motive. It is blind and purposeless.

### Worst of all worlds



In the previous chapter we saw how Leibniz's belief in an all-powerful, all-knowing and wholly benevolent creator led him to the view that this is the best of all possible worlds. Schopenhauer, unsurprisingly, rejected this idea. 'The absurdity is glaring,' he wrote.

Schopenhauer's view of reality as the product of blind will led him to a very different conclusion. The world is horrible. It would have been better had it – and we – never existed.

In fact, not content with saying that the world is bad, Schopenhauer made the bolder, and considerably more entertaining, claim that the world is just as bad as it can possibly be. His supporting argument appears in volume 2 of *The World as Will and Idea*:

Now this world is arranged as it had to be if it were to be capable of continuing with great difficulty to exist; if it were a little worse, it would be no longer capable of continuing to exist. Consequently, since a worse world could not continue to exist, it is absolutely impossible; and so this world itself is the worst of all possible worlds.

The argument is clever and amusing. But it rests upon a very dubious premise, namely that the world we inhabit totters on the very edge of annihilation; that the slightest change for the worse would render it completely unsustainable.

Schopenhauer cited various items of evidence in support of this claim. For example, he said that 'nine-tenths of mankind live in constant conflict with want, always balancing themselves with difficulty and effort on the brink of destruction'. And he claimed that a tiny alteration in the planet's orbit would extinguish all life on earth.

Examples of this kind may convince us that life on earth is fragile, and may even persuade us that the world is a pretty crappy place. But they fall far short of convincing us that the tiniest change for the worse would make the world's continued existence untenable. Hence, they fail to convince us that this is the worst of all possible worlds.

Schopenhauer assures us that he presents his proof 'seriously and honestly'. However, I can't help but picture him saying this with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. That's just my opinion, of course. Perhaps he was deadly serious.



**2. COULDN'T BE BETTER**



**23. AN END TO SUFFERING**

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## SELFISH MOTIVES

Does anyone ever perform a truly unselfish act? Surely the answer is yes. Every day we see examples of altruism and benevolence. People donate money to charity, volunteer time to worthwhile causes and perform acts of kindness towards strangers. And yet there is a school of thought known as *psychological egoism* which holds that none of these acts is truly altruistic; that they're all ultimately grounded in self-interest. But what selfish motives could anyone possibly have for performing them? This question was addressed by the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679).

### Human nature

Hobbes is best known for his political work *Leviathan*, in which he set forth a 'science of politics' – a blueprint for establishing a peaceful society. He began by identifying some basic facts about human nature, which he then used to predict how people would react to various circumstances. This, in turn, allowed him to prescribe a scientific form of government which will reliably lead to peace and security.

The view of human nature from which Hobbes began is not a flattering one. He viewed individuals as greedy, competitive and aggressive. He wrote, '[I]f any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and . . . endeavour to destroy or subdue one another.'

### The origin of altruism

Given that Hobbes viewed individuals as greedy and selfish, one might wonder how he accounted for the kinds of benevolent acts previously mentioned. His answer is that they are, in fact, motivated by self-interest.

How so? Well, Hobbes said that in addition to being greedy and aggressive, people are also reasonable. They are capable of thinking about where their best interests lie. For example, they can see that unbridled greed and aggression lead to conflict and war, which endangers their lives. Therefore, they are willing to show regard for others in order to secure peace and safety for themselves.

Building upon the unlikely foundation of individual self-interest, Hobbes proceeded to rebuild the entire moral code. In the dedication to his work, *On the Citizen*, he wrote: 'From these starting points [human greed and human reason] I believe I have demonstrated by the most evident inference . . . the necessity of agreements and of keeping faith, and thence the Elements of moral virtue and civil duties.'

# Helping others – selfishly

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Hobbes himself had a reputation for generosity and charitable giving. The antiquarian and writer John Aubrey gave a charming first-hand account of an occasion when Hobbes dug deep into his own pockets to relieve the distress of a beggar. This has every appearance of being an altruistic act, but Hobbes insisted that it was selfishly motivated: ‘I was in pain to consider the miserable condition of the old man; and now my alms, giving him some relieve, doth also ease me.’

All apparently selfless acts can be similarly reinterpreted. The young man who volunteers at the soup kitchen does so to feel good about himself and impress his friends. The mother who spends sleepless nights tending to a sick child is driven to do so by her own emotional needs. The soldier who saves his comrades by throwing himself on a grenade is prompted by a deep desire to think of himself and be thought of by others, as a hero.

## Every act is a selfish act

So psychological egoists like Hobbes hold a more subtle theory than at first appears. They do not make the palpably false claim that people never act benevolently, but rather maintain that benevolent actions, properly understood, are grounded in self-interest.

It is, in fact, possible to construct an argument that all actions *must* ultimately be self-interested. The argument runs as follows. Any act you perform voluntarily must be such that, on balance, you want to do it. Ultimately, then, you act to satisfy your own desires, which means that ultimately you act out of self-interest.

## Fancy footwork

But there seems to be some fancy footwork going on here. When confronted with actions that appear benevolent the psychological egoist simply shifts the focus from outward behaviours to inner motivations. But inner motivations are private things, not open to inspection. The psychological egoist, then, appears to be doing nothing more than making an *assumption* about human motivation – one that cannot be tested, confirmed or falsified. When presented with *any behaviour at all*, she will insist that it is self-interested. Why? Because that is the assumption on which she operates.

John: What that guy just did was clearly unselfish.

Jane: No, it *appeared* to be unselfish. But, actually, he had selfish motives.

John: How can you possibly know that?

Jane: Because all actions *are* selfishly motivated.

The argument that everything you do voluntarily must be something that you want to do, and therefore selfishly motivated, is equally dubious. It assumes that you can't have non-self-interested desires; that everything you want, you want for selfish reasons. But this is the very issue under discussion. It cannot simply be assumed.



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## NOTHING CHANGES

The universe is a single, unvarying ball of being. There's no past and no future. Nothing moves and nothing changes.

These are not the ravings of some obscure crank or crack-pot. They are the carefully considered and closely argued claims of the ancient Greek philosopher Parmenides, one of the most influential thinkers ever.

### Pioneer of reason

Parmenides (*fl.* fifth century BC) was born in the Greek colony of Elea on the southern coast of Italy. Very little is known about his life. And, indeed, not a great deal is known about his work. All that survives are some fragments, totalling 150 lines, of a poem that originally ran to perhaps 3,000 lines.

Parmenides earned his place in the philosophical hall of fame by being the first thinker to use strict reasoning to justify his metaphysical claims. Like many of his contemporaries he expressed his ideas in poetic form. But unlike them, he wasn't content with putting forward ideas that were merely interesting or plausible. He built up his theories logically, step by step, using meticulous argument. He *justified* his claims.

Parmenides' poem, *On Nature*, has been described as the first known attempt at systematic proof in Western philosophy. A huge achievement, by any standard.

### Nothing changes

It's not easy to translate or to interpret Parmenides' writings. This is partly because he expressed his thoughts through poetry, and partly because, being a pioneer in the method of systematic proof, he sometimes struggled to find appropriate words to express his ideas.

Even so, certain features of his thought are clear enough. His fundamental precept was that *what is, is; and what is not, is not*. From this he deduced that things can neither come into nor go out of being. Why not? Well, they can't come *into* being because this would mean coming from that which is not. And that which is not, is not; it doesn't exist. Similarly, things can't go *out of* being because this would mean becoming nothing. And nothing, by its very nature, doesn't exist.

He further deduced that the world is one thing, and not many. Why so? Because if the world were many things then each thing would have to be separated from the others by non-being; by emptiness. And non-being cannot exist because that which is not, is not.

Similar considerations reveal that nothing moves. Here's why. For a thing to move it must go into empty space. But empty space is where that which *is*, is not. In other words, it is where only the

which *is not* exists. But that which is not, is not. So there can be no empty space.

~~Change is also ruled out. This is because whenever you think, or express a thought, you think something. In other words, your thought refers to something outside yourself. But you can think of refer to that precise same thing at *any* time. Therefore it must exist in precisely the same way at *any* times. So nothing changes.~~

## The supremacy of reason

There are many ways in which we might take issue with Parmenides. We might, for example, accuse him of playing with or misusing words – or at least of placing too much emphasis on them. Words and phrases such as ‘is’, ‘is not’, ‘exists’ and ‘does not exist’ appear simple. But they are, in fact, very tricky to handle. To see that this is so, you have only to consider a statement like ‘the tooth fairy doesn’t exist’. It seems perfectly straightforward but it’s a philosophical minefield. This is because in order to say that the tooth fairy doesn’t exist you have to refer to her. But since you can refer to her, it is tempting to think that she must, in some sense, exist after all.

But the most natural objection to Parmenides’ view of reality is that it blatantly contradicts the evidence of our senses. He insisted that the world is one thing, motionless and changeless. But we only have to look around us to see that the world contains many things which are sometimes in motion and are subject to change.

Parmenides freely admitted this, but contended that reason is superior to the senses. If reason and the senses contradict one another then so much the worse for the senses. We must, Parmenides insisted, follow the arguments wherever they lead.

Reason demonstrates the world to be one thing and changeless; the senses suggest that the world contains many things and changing. But reason is supreme. Only the intellect reveals things as they really are. The world of sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell is mere illusion.

Parmenides’ ideas have been enormously influential. Most of the philosophers that came immediately after him devoted their energies to trying to reconcile his thesis that nothing changes with the seemingly contradictory evidence of the senses. Leucippus and Democritus, for example, explained the changing phenomena of the world in terms of the activity of unchanging atoms.

More importantly, Parmenides’ method of strict argument and his recognition of the distinction between appearance and reality have remained central to the philosophical enterprise right down to the present day.

6. NOTHING STAYS THE SAME



29. HARRY POTTER EXISTS



## NOTHING STAYS THE SAME

Little is known for certain about the Greek philosopher Heraclitus (535–475 BC). But it is generally agreed that he was an arrogant and unpopular man. In *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* the third-century biographer Diogenes Laertius tells us that Heraclitus' misanthropy eventually led him to shun society and live off grasses and plants in the mountains. His ideas survive only in fragments attributed to him by later writers.

Heraclitus famously declared, 'Into the same rivers we do and do not step.' This is a very enigmatic statement and there's some debate over precisely what he meant. But his point seems to have been something along the following lines.

A river is made of water. Flowing water. This means that the physical make up of a river changes from one moment to the next. The water that makes up a river at one instant isn't the same as the water that makes up the river at another. So although we can step twice into a river, we can't, strictly speaking, step twice into the *same* river. Rivers have the intriguing feature that they're defined by change. Change is part and parcel of their identity. A river that remains static isn't a river at all. It's something else. Perhaps a pond or a lake.

### Everything changes

This, in itself, is a fascinating insight. But Heraclitus had something more profound to share. He maintained that *everything* changes just as rivers do. 'The sun is . . . not only new each day but forms continually new', he said; and, 'It [is not] possible to touch a mortal substance twice.'

Modern science supports this notion. The desk I'm sitting at is made of wood. If I touch it twice, am I touching the same desk? In a sense, yes; but in another sense, no. How so? Well, scientists assure us that although wooden desks appear solid and static they are, in fact, composed of billions of subatomic particles all in ceaseless motion, and perhaps even popping into and out of existence. So although I can touch my desk twice, I cannot, strictly speaking, touch the *same* desk twice. Everything changes. Or, as Heraclitus put it, 'Nothing is; everything is becoming.'

### Everyone changes

What is true of rivers and desks is equally true of human beings. Our lives, too, are characterised by change. Heraclitus appreciated this, and followed up his observation that we cannot step twice into the same river with the words, 'We are and we are not.'

Change is part and parcel of our nature. Throughout the course of our lives we change physically and we change mentally. When we compare what we are now with what we once were, it seems that

we both are and are not the same.

What Heraclitus, through his enigmatic and obscure statements, seems to be suggesting is that things are not defined by their material constitution but rather by an underlying principle of change. It is in changing that things remain the same. This is a strange and even paradoxical concept, but it can be illustrated by means of a nice practical example.

## The Ship of Theseus

According to legend, Theseus was an Athenian youth who sailed to Crete and fought a half-man half-bull creature known as the Minotaur. After vanquishing the monster, Theseus returned to Athens where his ship was preserved as a lasting memorial to his heroism.

As time passed, parts of the wooden ship began to decay and had to be replaced. Eventually, so many pieces had been replaced that it was unclear how much of the original ship remained. This led the Athenian philosophers to question whether or not the much-repaired ship ought still to be regarded as the Ship of Theseus.

This is a tricky puzzle, especially since we can imagine a time when every single plank of the original ship has been replaced by new timber. In what sense, then, can it be said to be the same ship? Most people, after some reflection, are willing to accept that the ship can retain its identity despite radical changes in its material constitution provided those changes are made smoothly and gradually, one or two pieces at a time. The key concept is continuity.

The changes that occur in rivers, in the sun, in everyday objects and even in our physical bodies are very much like the changes undergone by the Ship of Theseus. Everything is in constant flux. But these changes are underpinned by law-like principles that ensure continuity and order. So, even as things change, they remain the same.

## A modern twist

There's a modern twist to the Ship of Theseus puzzle which makes it even more interesting, and which illustrates nicely the paradoxical element in Heraclitus' thought. In this version, as each decaying plank is replaced, it is taken away and used to create another vessel. So now there are two ships that can lay claim to the title, Ship of Theseus:

1. the seaworthy one constructed by gradually replacing parts from the original vessel;
2. the decaying one reconstructed from the original material.

The seaworthy ship lays claim to the title for the reasons already described, which are to do with continuity. The rotting ship lays claim to the title because it is made from the original materials and to the original specifications. This modern puzzle generates a lot of debate amongst philosophers about the roles that *spatiotemporal continuity* and *material constitution* play in enabling objects to persist through time.

The Ship of Theseus puzzle was probably devised after Heraclitus' time. He was, however, sensitive to the issues raised in even the modern version. 'Into the same rivers we *do* and *do not* step', he said, and 'We *are* and we *are not*.' So he recognised that both spatiotemporal continuity and materi-



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