

## A sense of wonder

*Confessions of a Philosopher* by Bryan Magee, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, £25, ISBN 0 279 81959 3

A YOUNG boy sits with 800 of his fellow school pupils in morning assembly. He closes his eyes and the rest of his school disappears. He is gripped by the thought that his only experience of the world is what presents itself to him in the confines of his head. He feels trapped. Filled with terror, he runs pale-faced out of the building. Such is the impact of real philosophical problems.

Why is there anything at all? Can time itself have a beginning? Is there a domain that is in principle beyond what we can know? Are there things we can know, but cannot say, only show, such as beauty or love? Imagine growing up with these problems, being frightened, perplexed and fascinated by them, but nevertheless making them your own. This was the path that the curious boy, Bryan Magee, is still walking. *Confessions of a Philosopher* is an engaging account of philosophical problems as Magee encountered them.

Magee has been an MP, a critic of music and theatre and is widely known for his TV series *Men of Ideas*. He is a fellow of Queen Mary College, London, and fellow of Keble College, Oxford. He reckons people fall into three categories in their response to life's fundamental questions: the childlike wonder of the philosopher; the flight into faith of the religious; and the simple refusal to think about them characteristic of most people. The first group realises that the questions, although apparently unanswerable, are significant and that you can at least explore them. The second class realises that there are no answers but acknowledges the questions are important, and embraces faith as if ignorance were a licence to believe what you wish. The third group simply fails to see the questions' significance, crawling back into the comfort of common sense.

Magee's heroes are those philosophers who did not lose their childhood wonder, but instead cultivated it and tried to answer the big questions. His list includes Hume, Kant and Schopenhauer, and, this century, Heidegger, Popper, Russell and Wittgenstein. The villains are the philosophers who have tried to reduce philosophy to the linguistic analysis of questions without trying to answer them: Austin, Ryle and Strawson.

Magee had the good fortune to have known two of this century's greatest philosophers, Popper and Russell. He says that Popper argued with an intensity reminiscent of a blowtorch, thus betraying his own argument for liberal tolerance. Popper realised that you cannot check how strong a position is if you do not defend it with vigour. Magee remarks how excited Popper would be

when he arrived at his home, and how he would drag him straight into the white heat of his current problem.

Magee is enthralled not only by Popper's approach to ascertaining the truth of knowledge, but also by Kant's argument for the limitations to human knowledge and understanding. Since our knowledge is limited to what we can possibly experience, and our possible experience is limited by the structure of our brains and sensory apparatus, our knowledge is limited by our physiology. We too are trapped inside our heads.



Matt Harris

But Magee does not explore the possibility that language, an example of Popper's World 3 objects (abstract products of the mind), has liberated us from our physiology. The content of Einstein's general theory of relativity, a denizen of World 3, is clearly not limited by our physiology. And the Internet and artificial intelligence is set to extend the domain of World 3 beyond our feeble frames. We'll feel less claustrophobia than that small boy in assembly. □

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Volcanoes of doom?  
◆ Sue Bowler on  
Fisher, Heiken and  
Hulen ◆ Ray Percival  
on Bryan Magee  
◆ John Casti on  
Wang's Gödel