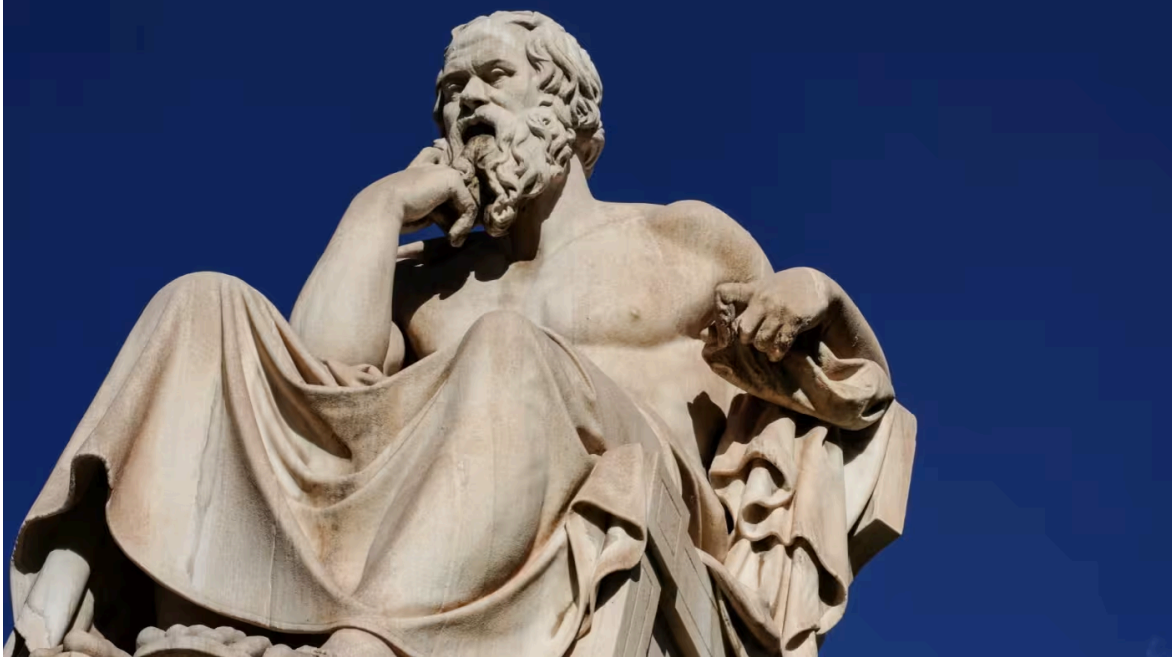


Opinion **Non-Fiction**

The return of the (original) celebrity philosophers

The TikTok generation is rediscovering thinkers both ancient and modern who can help them make sense of the world

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Socrates, known for his belief in the power of the examined life © Getty Images

Nilanjana Roy 13 HOURS AGO

Perhaps the happiest being I've ever met is the youngest of our cats, Magnus Musafir, who spends 80 per cent of his time swaggering, eating, raising hell, sleeping, demanding cuddles, bounding and swinging off the curtains, and the remaining 20 per cent staring out across the roof in deep contemplation of *The Meaning of Life*. Most humans are not as wise as Magnus M; hence we need philosophers.

TikTok, the social networking site that hosts several thriving communities of readers, first alerted me to the return of philosophers as essential guides to life for readers in their twenties and thirties. They made Albert Camus' novels *The Stranger* (1942) and *The Plague* (1947) bestsellers before and after the 2019 pandemic; they pass around quotes by Hannah Arendt and dissect Martin Heidegger's links with Nazism.

And they have made cult favourites of modern-day philosophers such as Slavoj Žižek, the famous Slovenian Marxist public intellectual, and Byung-Chul Han, who argued against the “hectic rush” of today’s “achievement society” in his 2015 *The Burnout Society*, and critiqued the relentless focus on storytelling as “storyselling” in *The Crisis of Narration* (2024). (Žižek remains puzzled by his TikTok fame, writing in a recent column for *The Spectator*: “A couple of times I’ve been tempted to reply under a pseudonym, attacking myself.”)

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For teenagers and adults alike, modern life can feel increasingly frantic, an endless to-do list that is by definition impossible to complete — and the answer to what makes a good life feels far more elusive in our age of constant churn and challenge.

Across the world, the ideas, provocations and prescriptions of philosophers, their advice on how to live and think clearly and their clarity on how to make sense of a

sometimes bewildering world, seem ever more helpful. Agnes Callard, the American philosopher, makes a persuasive plea to return philosophical thinking to the centre of our lives in *Open Socrates: The Case for a Philosophical Life* (2025), socking it to readers in her first paragraph: “There’s a question you are avoiding. Even now, as you read this sentence, you’re avoiding it.” We have busy lives, she writes, the days and hours speeding by as we tackle work, chores, friendships, children. “Your life is full. It has no space for the question, ‘Why am I doing any of this?’”

Instead, she asks us to pause and to take Socrates, the Greek philosopher born in 470BC and known for his belief in the power of the examined life, as one’s guide and do better. “We are unable to think about the most important things on our own, and we habitually shield ourselves from this terrifying fact. All of us, even professional philosophers, walk around with a conceit of knowledge separating us from other people . . . Socrates dismantled that barrier.”

Callard speaks directly to what you might call the Fleabag generation. In the immensely popular streaming series of the same name, Fleabag confesses to her friend, a priest: “I want someone to tell me what to wear every morning. I want someone to tell me what to eat. What to like, what to hate, what to rage about”. The fear she expresses — that you’re somehow living your life all wrong — is shared by millennials and Gen X alike, and Callard’s Socratic vision offers a way out that is not glib, that requires more effort than journaling or posting reels, but that might help people change their thinking.

Other philosophers speak for us by asking big questions or bringing old ideas back to vivid life. In *Ignorance and Bliss: On Wanting Not to Know* (2024), the American political scientist and historian Mark Lilla helps clarify why facts and strong arguments may not change the minds of many. The desire to know, he writes, and knowing itself, “is an emotional experience”, far more than the senses sending messages to the brain. “Just as we can develop a love of truth that stirs us within, so we can develop a hatred of truth that fills us with a passionate sense of purpose.”

Callard and Lilla approach ignorance and the search for truth in different, illuminating ways. Hanno Sauer, the German writer, philosopher and associate professor of philosophy at Utrecht University, takes another tack, covering five million years of human history in a brisk, engaging survey in *The Invention of Good and Evil: A World History of Morality* (2024), translated by Jo Heinrich. He holds out hope for co-operation and the discovery of shared, deep-seated moral values, citing the history of learning to work together when humans were merely the most intelligent of the apes, surviving in “large swathes of open grassland” for millions of years.

But he is also, refreshingly in a time awash with nauseous quantities of positive psychology, a realist: moral progress is possible, but not inevitable. “[E]very achievement has to be defended from the regressive forces of a stubborn human nature, the irrationalities of the human psyche and the mercilessness of fate.”

Philosophers are not inclined to dole out the syrup of Instagram inspiration; many of them held practical occupations, like John Locke who was personal physician to the Earl of Shaftesbury, a promising philosopher himself, or India’s formidable Chanakya, who advised the emperor Chandragupta Maurya and his son, Bindusara around 300BC. As a tribe, they speak directly to the modern need to make sense of things. Ancient or modern, they don’t often have all of the answers, but they ask the right questions — which may be exactly what we’re seeking these days.