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MARTIN'S PHILOSOPHICAL NOTES

Books as Sources of Ideas and Intuitions

By **Martin Cohen**

Part of the triumph of science and technology in so many areas of life is that we begin to look at the world as a collection of facts, scientific facts. Religion and philosophy are pushed to the sidelines, while biotechnologists, cosmologists and software engineers become our leaders, or sometimes, it almost seems, our secular gods.

At the very least, it seems as if big ideas come not from imagination but from those who chisel away at the rock-face of scientific knowledge. Yet I think this perception is misleading, because new ideas, big ideas, real ideas, contain within them something science and logic cannot provide. And this is *creative inspiration*. It is only this that actually allows a new and unexpected perspective on the world.

A few years back I looked into a related question that eventually became a recently published book (*The Leader's Bookshelf: 25 Great Books and Their Readers* – Cohen, 2022*)*. I started with an entirely open mind about which books really were influential and, well – inspirational. In fact, if anything, I imagined that the books would be factual, texts ranging from grand, even philosophical ones like Darwin's *Origin of Species* and J.S. Mill's *On Liberty* or (more recent) campaigning books such as *Silent Spring*, by Rachel Carson or *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth,* by James Lovelock. And indeed, texts like the ones I mention here did indeed turn up in my survey, alongside a scattering of inspirational biographies. These last are books like Barack Obama's *Dreams of My Father* and Alex Haley's slightly misleadingly named *Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

But put all this predictable stuff aside, because what really came out from my efforts to compile a list of highly influential books was something both unexpected and rather refreshing. It turns out that books that inspire people include apparently rather lightweight texts like classic children's books, literary novels and iconoclastic humour.

In a sense we might have guessed that. But book lists are often slanted in the telling to appear more logical and high-brow than they really are. That's a bias both of individuals and social science methods. Book lists are *declarative*. Take Warren Buffett. Famously, his advice to other would-be leaders was to point at a pile of books in his office and offer as a life strategy: 'Read 500 pages like this every day.'

Five hundred pages, 'Like this'? The directive turns books into a kind of raw material that might be dug out of the ground, transported by donkeys to warehouses and sold on the stock exchanges that Buffett's life revolves around. To me, it's absurd to imagine that ploughing through pages of texts chosen more or less indiscriminately could give you anything other than tired eyes and a headache. But maybe that's

not what Buffett was really urging. Maybe he was really saying that time invested (and 'investments' is the word that defines this man) in reading is well spent because books are like brain multipliers. An author can spend years writing a book – but you can extract its nuggets in just minutes.

That's why I look at books not as elegant literary discourses, but as sources of *ideas*. Books matter, because ideas matter. But neither books nor ideas can really just be piled up and worked through in the manner of Warren Buffett and a thousand subsequent leadership gurus. And that's because what makes an idea powerful is something very particular to each individual reader.

Take Steve Jobs, Apple computer's idiosyncratic pioneer. One of my favourite quotations of his beautifully sums up the Apple supremo's approach to life: 'Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma – which is living with the results of other people's thinking.' That looks like a thumbs-down for books, and especially biographies. And yet, it was both a work of new-age philosophy, and something of an autobiography too, that did inspire him. Jobs discovered *Be Here Now*, a guide to meditation and the wonders of psychedelic drugs, while at college in California. In this counter-cultural bible, Baba Ram Dass, born Richard Alpert, advises things like 'What we're seeing "out there" is the projection of where we're at – the projection of the clingings of our minds'; and 'My life is a creative act – like a painting, or a concerto'.

You've guessed it: '*Be Here Now* is neither great writing nor deep philosophy. But for Jobs it was profound', as he told his biographer. 'It transformed me and many of my friends.'

Note that word 'transform'. Quite what it is in books that can do this is not clear, but being elegantly written or, alternatively, stuffed full of important statistics is not the key. No, it is something much more direct and personal. Books remind us that even a joke can contain insights. And, for Steve Jobs, great businesses are built up out of the bricks of intellectual playfulness, research, experimentation, analysis and judgement. For him, of all of these, it was intellectual playfulness that was the most important.

Be Here Now is at least trying to be inspirational. But consider the case of the influential environmentalist, Jane Goodall. She came across the powerful idea that animals have sophisticated lives involving non-linguistic communication in the Doctor Dolittle children's books: the ones in which a parrot teaches the eponymous doctor the secrets of animal communication. I like these books, so simple yet elegantly crafted. But they're not great literature. People don't include them on their lists of influences. Even Goodall downplays the link in some of her interviews.

Herman Melville's novel, *Moby Dick*, by contrast, is rather grand, but it is still surprising to find that the book inspired another great environmentalist, Rachel Carson. Her resolve to take up the issue of man's attempt to control nature (specifically with pesticides) was re-focused by the fictional account of Captain Ahab battling the whale, 'Moby Dick'. Yet Carson read the book for pleasure, and the insights came by chance.

Sure, Bill Gates and Warren Buffett work their respective ways through tottering piles of books, and that shows you can get rich with second-hand thinking. But that's the low-hanging fruit in life. The prizes really go to those who change the way we think. Rachel Carson is rightly considered one of the key figures in the environmental movement – she changed the way many people saw technology and our interaction with, and stewardship of, the natural environment.

However, of all the books in my list, perhaps the most influential in terms of changing the way we think is one that most of you will likely not even have heard of. It is, however, the inspiration behind one of the most discussed philosophy books of the twentieth century – *Philosophical Investigations* by philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Of course, it's no surprise that philosophers and philosophical works pop up as influential texts more often than any others – philosophers are supposed to be the 'big ideas' people. But pause for a moment here. We usually imagine such thinkers starting from scratch, maybe by meditating in a warm oven room in the fashion made famous by René Descartes – yet that's not quite right. In fact, philosophers, just like the rest of us, are often following up something they were told or read.

Take Plato. His writings have been aptly described as the source for which all subsequent philosophy is merely footnotes – and yet Plato himself was clearly influenced by his reading of texts by mystical figures such as Pythagoras. In fact, the characters in Plato's book are chosen to indicate that the theories they voice are not Plato's own but, rather, summaries of these other individuals' ideas.

As for Descartes, the French thinker is remembered for giving us the famous dictum 'I think, therefore, I am', yet he did not really come up with it through personal introspection (as his books *Discourses on Method* and *Meditations on First Philosophy* pretend) – he merely repeated in a new form an old Jesuit lesson. I say 'in a new form', but in fact even the style of his book – informal, gently witty, written in the first person – was borrowed from something he had read: the highly popular writings of Montaigne, whose *Essays*, consisting of carefully self-deprecating rambling observations, had already delighted French aristocrats for a good 50 years. Descartes book, the one that inspired so many subsequent writers, was itself very closely linked to things he had read.

Actually, Descartes opens the *Discourses* with a crafty reference to his predecessor, when he says that 'good sense is the most evenly distributed thing in the world'. Montaigne had used the saying in his book, but went on to say, however, that this is only because it seems no one is dissatisfied with their own share of it. Descartes offers no such humorous note.

But Montaigne is not Descartes' only unacknowledged source. As befits one educated under the most stern and orthodox Jesuit masters, Descartes repeats many of Saint Augustine's credos in his philosophy. The famous 'method of doubt' crucially does not include doubting those opinions that appear particularly plausible. Saint Augustine himself referred to the assistance of 'divine revelation' in coping with the uncertainties of human knowledge: this is recast as 'natural light' by Descartes, when he says that all that appears obvious to us – 'everything perceived clearly and distinctly' – must be true.

When Descartes wrote the famous words *cogito ergo sum* (which render themselves so elegantly in English as 'I think, therefore I am'), the Saint had already taught that 'He who is not can certainly not be deceived; therefore, if I am deceived, I am'. (And when Augustine said this, he seems to be echoing Eastern Thinkers, too.)

But to see how books influence books, let's look more closely at the most famous, if by no means the smartest, let alone the most productive, philosopher of the twentieth century, the Austrian eccentric, Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein only published one book in his lifetime, called obscurely the *Tractatus Logicus Philosophicus*, which is a mix of the views of his academic supervisor at Cambridge, Bertrand Russell, and a rather nasty tract by Otto Weininger called *Sex and Character*, a text which was also – wait for it! – much admired by one Adolf Hitler.

But that's politics. Sticking to philosophy, it is Wittgenstein's second book, *Philosophical Investigations*, which is both rather better and more interesting to us. This, without doubt, was inspired in crucial ways by another text, the Irish clergyman Laurence Sterne's account of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, which was written in nine chunks, with the first appearing as long ago as 1759. Venerable, yes, but this one is not the sort of book you would expect to be influencing an earnest, even monomaniac philosopher like Wittgenstein. After all, it is not, on the face of it, a *serious* book. It is not, apparently, a work of *philosophy*. Rather it is an extended parody of what is otherwise offered as

the autobiographical, personal story of the life of a humble pastor living in the north of England.

The book is ostensibly Tristram's woeful narration of key episodes in his life, from the time as a toddler the sash window fell on his 'manhood', accidentally circumcising him – ''Twas nothing, I did not lose two drops of blood by it – 'twas not worth calling in a surgeon, had he lived next door to us – thousands suffer by choice, what I did by accident' – to his father's neglect of his education on account of his determination to first write a *Tristapaedia*, meaning a book to outline the system under which Tristram was to be educated. And all the time it is one of the central jokes of the novel that Tristram cannot explain anything simply, that he must make explanatory diversions to add context and colour to his tale, to the extent that it is well into Volume III before he manages to even mention his own birth.

Wittgenstein liked the book so much that he constantly referred to it, and his contemporaries recall him claiming to have read and re-read it a dozen times! Maurice O'Connor Drury, psychiatrist and loyal follower, for example, notes in his book, *Conversations with Wittgenstein*, that the celebrated philosopher once told him, 'Now a book I like greatly is Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. That is one of my favourite books.'

The debt of Wittgenstein – and hence much modern philosophy – to Laurence Sterne's humorous novel is as remarkable as it is unexpected. The first influence is stylistic – but the style produces new ways to see issues. Within the world of philosophy, Wittgenstein is celebrated for his 'language games', yet the first round, indeed the invention of the sport, clearly belongs to Sterne. The same playfulness that leads Sterne to use typographical tricks and techniques such as dots, dashes, blank pages, and even a 'black page', reappear in Wittgenstein's book as intriguing graphics, alongside the famous doodle of a duck that might be a rabbit, depending on what you're thinking as you look at it.

More importantly, Wittgenstein found inspiration in the permanent digressions that thwart the telling of Shandy's story as well as in the way that Sterne plays with words, often teasing the reader with the many ways that they can be used. Sometimes words are a straightforward record of a conversation, but at other times they 'point beyond the text', and force the reader to suddenly re-evaluate all that has come before. In such changes of perspective, much of the humour lies.

Both Sterne and Wittgenstein demand 'reader participation and response'. Or as Wittgenstein says in the preface to his *Philosophical Investigations*, 'I should not like my writing to spare people the trouble of thinking. But, if possible, to stimulate someone to thoughts of his own.'

In a book called *Wittgenstein' s Place in Twentieth-Century Analytic Philosophy* (1996), a British professor named Peter Hacker, who is counted in philosophy circles as one of the 'principal commentators' on Wittgenstein's work, observes that

> although the *Investigations* is written in brief and often apparently disconnected remarks, although it frequently jumps from topic to topic without indicating the reasons for such sudden transitions, and although it has seemed to many readers to be a philosophy that revels in lack of systematicity, it is in fact... a highly systematic, integrated work, and anything but a haphazard collection or *aperçus.*

Exactly the same could be said of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, although Hacker, like nearly all Wittgenstein experts, doesn't make the link. But then, as I say, Sterne was not a professor, nor a philosopher!

In an account of Wittgenstein's thinking for the *New York Review of Books* (Hacking, 1982, online; see also Hacking, 2002, p. 218), the Canadian philosopher, Ian Hacking says:

> …in the later philosophy, Wittgenstein came to see that language is not one monolithic system of representations for picturing reality. Instead it is composed of myriad fragments that loosely

> overlap and intersect. Most of these are not used to represent anything. We are told to look at little bits of real or invented discourse to see what nonlinguistic activity – what social context or use – must accompany each one in order for it to make sense.

This is true of many novels, and is also exactly how Sterne writes too. At least the philosophy professor, Beth Savickey, in a book titled *Wittgenstein's Art of Investigation*, hints at a connection. She identifies key elements in Wittgenstein's work that are more literary than philosophical, let alone 'logical', saying:

> Wittgenstein 's later writings are, perhaps, the only truly twentieth century philosophical writings we have. They are characterised by a participatory mystique, the fostering of a communal sense, the concentration of the present moment, and the repetition of grammatical techniques. (p. 124)

All of which is deeply *Shandyean*. Savickey sees Wittgenstein enthusiastically following Sterne in his explorations of 'the strengths and limitations of textualized language', but even so she sees only a superficial link between the two writers. On the other hand, she claims several German-language philosophers, from Hegel and Schopenhauer and on to Marx and Nietzsche, as writers whose thinking was directly affected by the Irish humorist.

So many philosophers inspired by a work of scurrilous humour! That seems a stretch, but it certainly makes two important points: first, that all kinds of books can have an influence well beyond their intended audience; and secondly, that that influence can sometimes be completely forgotten!

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About the contributor

Dr Martin Cohen is an author specialising in popular books in philosophy and social science. His writing ranges widely, as he likes to make connections between different areas and ideas. As well as *Paradigm Shift*, featured in the previous issue (AHPb online magazine no. 7), his books include *101 Philosophy Problems, Critical Thinking Skills for Dummies, I Think Therefore I Eat* and even a book on nuclear economics called *The Doomsday Machine*. *I Think Therefore I Eat*, in particular, combines philosophy and food, offering surprising insights into why everything we eat makes us fat, and seems to have more to do with laboratories than farms!