

AN INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY

BIG IDEAS FOR
CURIOUS MINDS

THE SCHOOL OF LIFE PRESS



WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

Philosophy is quite a mysterious subject that most people don't know anything about. The average school doesn't teach it, the average adult does not understand it, and the whole subject can seem odd and kind of unnecessary. That's a real pity, because in fact, philosophy has a lot to teach everyone, whatever their age. It might even be the most important subject you will ever study. This book wants to open the door for you—to show you what philosophy is all about, and how it can help you to understand life.

The word 'philosophy' itself gives us a bit of a clue as to why the subject matters. It's originally a word from Ancient Greek: the first part, *philo*, means 'love' (*philately* means the love of stamps). The second part, which comes from the word *sophia*, means 'wisdom'. So, when you put the two parts together—*philo-sophy*—it literally means 'the love of wisdom'.

Philosophy helps us to live wise lives. But what does 'wisdom' mean? It's not very obvious, at first. Is being wise just about being clever? No, it's much more than that. It's about being sensible, kind, calm and accepting

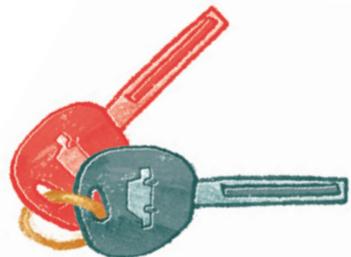
of how life can sometimes be (which isn't always perfect, and sometimes really quite hard).

To get a better idea of what wisdom might involve, we can think about its opposite: not being wise. Imagine that your mum loses her keys. There are unwise ways she might deal with this. Maybe she starts shouting at other people: 'Who moved my car keys?' (even though probably no one did move them). Or maybe she gets into a panic and throws herself onto the sofa, moaning that she's a complete idiot and that her entire life is ruined. Poor mum!

What would a wiser mum do? Instead of ranting and raving, or starting to panic straight away, she would think: 'Well, car keys do tend to get lost from time to time. I must have put them somewhere... maybe they're in the coat I was wearing yesterday.' She could ask (calmly) if you had seen them, and she might even laugh about how silly she was to forget where she'd put them.

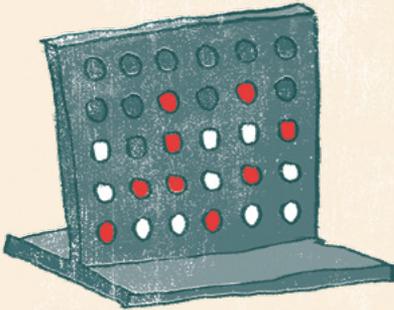
There are lots of situations where you can see the difference between unwise and wise ways of dealing with stuff that happens. There are lots of problems, both big and small, in everyone's life—including yours, too, of course. We can never get rid of them entirely (though we try hard), but we can all get better at how we deal with our problems.

We can try not to get angry so often, try to shout less, and try not to panic or hurt the people we love. Philosophy tries to help us act more wisely when facing the problems in our lives that we can't do much about.



WISE AND UNWISE RESPONSES

YOU LOSE A GAME
OF CONNECT FOUR TO
YOUR BROTHER



UNWISE RESPONSES

Accuse your brother of cheating
(though you know they didn't really)

Tell everyone how much you hate the
game you were playing

Feel that it's incredibly important that you
lost, and that you won't get over it for ages

or

WISE RESPONSES

Remember it's only a game, and that whether
you have good luck says nothing about what
you're like as a person

Remind yourself that you're bound to win
some other time and that there are other,
more important, things in your life

A FRIEND ISN'T VERY
NICE TO YOU



UNWISE RESPONSES

Be horrible back to them

Feel that maybe you deserve
to be treated badly

or

WISE RESPONSES

Wonder what might be
upsetting them

Tell them calmly that they hurt your
feelings, and ask what's wrong

MAYBE YOU ARE JUST TIRED

When you are in a bad mood, you usually want to blame someone. You feel fed up and annoyed and your brain looks around to see whose fault it could be—your teacher, your parents, your friends, maybe your brother or sister. But sometimes it's not really anyone's fault. Instead, there's a very different kind of explanation. Nothing is really wrong at all, you are just feeling grumpy and bothered because you haven't been getting enough sleep and you are tired.

Imagine you are running and you come to a hill. If you have just started running and you've got lots of energy, the hill isn't a problem. You don't mind. It will be fun to see how fast you can run up it. But if you've been running for quite a long way already and your legs ache and you're out of breath, the hill will seem horrible. You can't face it. It's exactly the same hill but you feel very differently about it—and it all depends on how tired you are. It is the same with lots of things, and not only physical things either. Maybe you have to do quite a difficult maths sum. If you're feeling full of energy, you don't mind. It's tricky but you can have a go. But if you

are very tired, it feels too hard. It makes you angry and upset that you have to do it. It's the same sum. The difference is that you're tired.

Being told that 'maybe you are just tired' can be really irritating. Usually it doesn't feel like that's the reason why you are in bad mood. The trouble is that you can be tired but not notice. Once again, your brain doesn't realise what's really going on.

It is not only being tired that can put you in a bad mood. It could also be that you are hungry, or haven't drunk enough water, or you have spent too much time indoors and have not been running around enough. It could even be that winter has been going on too long and you haven't had enough sunshine. All these things make a difference to the mood you are in.

We don't usually think about these things when we're in a bad mood, and instead, we imagine that the reason we feel upset is because of something someone else has done. We get so wound up that we want to shout at them and tell them how horrid they are. But what will actually make us feel better might be a rest, a glass of water, some lunch or a play outside.

It is odd—but interesting—that you can forget there might be very simple reasons you're feeling upset. The good thing about simple reasons, though, is that they can be fixed simply, too. It isn't that easy to make up with a friend after an argument, get your mum to be less busy with work or suddenly to become brilliant at singing or basketball—but you can get a glass of water. You can't make that bully at school like you, but you can eat a sandwich.



Adults are especially bad at seeing that they might be in a bad mood just because they are tired. Adults like to think that if they feel upset it must be for a big, important reason—probably something to do with politics or world affairs, or because their boss at work is much more stupid than they could ever be. It's hard for them to remember that a bad feeling can have a very simple explanation: maybe they just stayed up too late last night or should urgently have some orange juice.

A CHECKLIST TO SEE IF I'M JUST TIRED

When you suddenly feel sad, before you despair, see if the following might apply:

- I have not had anything to eat for a few hours
- I went to bed very late last night
- I had a really busy day at school today

Add in a few other 'small' explanations for feeling like you have very big problems:

AN IDEA FROM MATSUO BASHO

The philosopher Matsuo Basho was interested in the way that small, simple things can make a big difference to our lives. He lived in Japan over three hundred years ago. He came from a very ordinary family and when he was quite young he worked as a servant in the house of a local nobleman, who was a very good employer and helped a lot with Matsuo's education. When he was older he lived on his own in a small hut and went for long walks in the countryside. He had a career as a poet, writing very, very short poems called haikus. They were extremely popular, so he was able to make quite a lot of money. But Basho didn't want to live a fancy life. He was very fond of nature, particularly liking trees and flowers, and he loved watching frogs in a nearby pond. Matsuo Basho thought that we often get bothered and upset because we forget about simple things. We think that it must only be big, complicated things that are important.

Matsuo Basho liked to tell people how much he enjoyed little things: having a cup of tea in the morning, eating simple vegetables on a winter's day (he recommended leeks), listening to a bird chirping away, looking at clouds or watching raindrops. He was an important philosopher who reminds people, even today, of the strange fact that our mood, and our feeling of whether life is pleasing or horrible, can depend on such tiny things. They seem so small, but they make a big difference to us.



