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# THE TIMES

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## 16 best philosophy and ideas books 2021

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No Descartes in sight — James Marriott and James McConnachie's picks take in morals, meritocracy, trans issues and technology

Whether it's been Covid healthcare, the rise of AI and social media or the trans debate, we've all become philosophers in recent years. These choices cover all of these contemporary issues — and ask whether our incessant arguing is doing us any good...

The Times book of the year

The Aristocracy of Talent: How Meritocracy Made the Modern World by Adrian Wooldridge

The failure of meritocracy is one of the big underlying stories of the moment. The past few years have seen a remarkable intellectual assault on the idea, most notably by Daniel Markovits in

The Meritocracy Trap

and Michael Sandel in

The Tyranny of Merit

. In

[The Aristocracy of Talent](#)

, the

Economist

writer Adrian Wooldridge defends the meritocratic ideal. The book offers a sweeping account of the history of meritocracy, from the elaborate exams required to join the Chinese civil service to the problems with our dysfunctional present version of meritocracy, which Wooldridge says might be better called "pluto-meritocracy". Essential reading for anyone who wants to understand one of the important problems facing rich nations.

JM

Allen Lane, £25

The Sunday Times book of the year

The Rag and Bone Shop: How We Make Memories and Memories Make Us by Veronica O'Keane

Very much in the tradition of Oliver Sacks, the Dublin-based psychiatrist Veronica O'Keane weaves together literature, neuroscience and clinical case-studies to create a ruminative yet

[well-evidenced investigation](#)

of memory. Most remarkable, though, are her own, extraordinary personal encounters with patients — psychotics, depressives, amnesiacs — whose memories have in some way let them down. O’Keane’s unsettling conclusion — that memory is as real as our present-moment conscious experience — will haunt you as much as her revealing and sometimes harrowing real-life stories.

JMc

Allen Lane, £20

The Status Game: On Social Position and How We Use It by Will Storr

Will Storr is one of our best journalists of ideas: from

Selfie

, a history of western self-obsession, to

The Science of Storytelling

, about how narrative shapes human lives and culture, his books are just joyfully interesting.

[The Status Game](#)

might be his best yet. In it, he shows how competition for status shapes the human world, from the modern office to the yam-displaying ceremonies of Micronesian tribes. Most interesting, perhaps, is his discussion of the way status competition accelerates the growth of extreme political beliefs online, as we are driven to demonstrate our superiority by espousing ever more hardline views.

JM

William Collins, £20

Rationality: What It Is, Why It Seems Scarce, Why It Matters by Steven Pinker

In this “rationality 101” course book, Pinker

[offers all the tools you need](#)

to flourish in a world of misinformation, flawed reasoning and bad-faith arguments. Spiky, witty and invigorating, he covers logic, critical thinking, probability, statistics and game theory, leavening the mix with lecturers’ jokes and startling examples of fallacies — along with sideswipes at the culture warriors and postmodernists who, Pinker fears, would like to do away with the very idea of objectivity.

JMc

Allen Lane, £25

Generations: Does When You’re Born Shape Who You Are? By Bobby Duffy

In

[this fascinating book](#)

, Bobby Duffy, director of the Policy Institute at King’s College London, takes a great big water cannon of data and sprays it all over popular myths about the “generation gap” between young and old. Some stand up: thanks to the housing crisis, millennials are much less wealthy than older generations were at an equivalent stage of life. The old overwhelmingly vote Conservative and the young overwhelmingly vote Labour. But on some “culture war” issues the differences are exaggerated. Social attitudes towards matters of identity have changed over time among all generations. Social media may not be as damaging as we fear. Sceptical? Duffy has an awful lot of graphs on his side.

JM

Atlantic, £20

The Inevitable: Dispatches on the Right to Die by Katie Engelhart

Not one to pop under the tree for your in-laws, perhaps — happy Christmas! — but this is an engrossing, important and

[surprisingly warm book](#)

. Engelhart doesn't only tackle the legal and ethical questions around euthanasia and the right to die, she meets people who are exercising that right — often circumventing the law to do so. Engelhart is a documentary film-maker, as well as a journalist, and it shows: you feel you're there in the room.

JMc

Atlantic, £15.99

Beyond Bad: How Obsolete Morals Are Holding Us Back by Chris Paley

You may think that a book about morality hardly sounds like a thrilling read. You would be wrong.

[Chris Paley's book](#)

brilliantly explores the evolutionary origins of the impulses and behaviours we call "moral". There are of course no abstract moral principles that guide our actions — there is no "morality particle", as Paley says. Instead our "morality" developed to help us to survive in hunter-gatherer bands out on the savannahs of our deep prehistory. It is often positively unhelpful when it comes to navigating the challenges of the modern world, from climate change to Twitter. Paley's explanation of the way our sphere of moral concern extends only to members of our own tribe explains a lot of what is going wrong with everything at the moment. In an age where moral certainties are everywhere, this book is vital.

JM

Coronet, £16.99

Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism by Kathleen Stock and The Transgender Issue: An Argument for Justice by Shon Faye

The controversial analytical philosopher — who was notoriously bullied out of her job at Sussex — icily

[dismantles the ideology](#)

that says that gender trumps sex and you are what you say you are. Stock's book is very readable, and persuasive on its own terms, but it is also one-sided and sometimes tin-eared, so I've matched it with trans activist Shon Faye's

[passionately reasoned defence](#)

, which marshals the arguments Stock avoids. If you know what you think about all this, she — Faye — might move you to think again.

JMc

Fleet, £16.99; Allen Lane, £20

The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity by David Graeber and David Wengrow

This ambitious, flawed and fascinating history of humanity is the last book by the anarchist intellectual David Graeber, one of the most important left-wing thinkers of our time, who died last year.

[In this book](#)

Graeber and his co-author David Wengrow aim to show that social hierarchies are not an inevitable feature of human societies. Whether or not you buy the thesis, their arguments are interesting, as are their accounts of how some human societies have managed without hierarchies — and even, in the case of some hunter-gatherers, used seasonal hierarchies that change depending on the time of year.

JM

Allen Lane, £30

Conflicted: Why Arguments Are Tearing Us Apart and How They Can Bring Us Together by Ian Leslie

Conflicted is so

[intelligent and refreshing](#)

that you could read it as a self-help guide, business book or journalistic investigation. Leslie tells stories of epic disagreements (Nelson Mandela with Afrikaner fascists, the FBI's siege of Waco) to throw light on smaller ones, and consults everyone from divorce lawyers and linguists to forensic psychologists and Immanuel Kant to force a reboot of our attitude to conflict. His message? Conflict is crucial. So crucial that we have to do it much better — including online, where shallow fights are “a smoke screen for flight” from real engagement.

JMc

Faber, £14.99

The Authority Gap: Why Women Are Still Taken Less Seriously Than Men, and What We Can Do About It by Mary Ann Sieghart

Mary Ann Sieghart, a former

Times

columnist, explores how society's “implicit” bias against women affects even those at the very top.

[The book](#)

is founded on interviews with powerful women, from Hillary Clinton to the judge Brenda “Spiderwoman” Hale. It's also chockful of dispiriting statistics. For instance, one study found that men thought women were dominating the conversation, even when they spoke for only 30 per cent of the time. Only 19 per cent of experts quoted in the British media are women.

JM

Doubleday, £16.99

The Devil You Know: Stories of Human Cruelty and Compassion by Gwen Adshead and Eileen Horne

Medical casebook memoirs are one thing: this

[window into the minds of the darkest criminals](#)

of all is another. Gwen Adshead (working with the high-calibre author Eileen Horne) is a forensic psychiatrist who practised in Broadmoor. She describes 11 patients (supposedly composites), including a paedophile GP, a predatory sex killer, a random knife-attacker with PTSD. Given the nature of the crimes, Adshead's compassion is almost as shocking as the offences themselves. But it gives her distance and extraordinary insight — not least into the nature of therapy, and of punishment.

JMc

Faber, £16.99

Exponential: How Accelerating Technology Is Leaving Us Behind and What to Do About It by Azeem Azhar

Azeem Azhar (author of the popular tech newsletter

Exponential View

) looks at how tech companies conquered the world and how their thirst for endless growth shapes the way they operate. Because tech companies own few real assets (Uber has no cars, Airbnb no hotels),

[Azhar argues](#)

, they are, at least temporarily, immune from the laws of gravity that affect traditional businesses. The aim is to grow and grow and grow. This heralds an eventful, if rather alarming, new phase in human history.

JM

Random House, £20

Life as We Made It: How 50,000 Years of Human Innovation Refined — and Redefined — Nature by Beth Shapiro

Beth Shapiro is an American evolutionary biologist, and an accessible, enlightening writer. Here she tells the epic evolutionary story of how our species has always manipulated nature, from mass extinctions to

domestication, and how it might do so more — much more — in the future. She explains the new gene-editing technologies with clarity and excitement, underlining their extraordinary power to do everything from concocting more flavoursome tomatoes to creating sterile mosquitoes and bringing back woolly mammoths. Big history meets big science — and it's great entertainment.

JMc

Oneworld, £18.99

Things I Have Withheld by Kei Miller

Shortlisted for the Baillie Gifford, the most reliable gauge of excellence in non-fiction, this

[collection of essays](#)

by the gay Jamaican poet Kei Miller is a subtle, intimate yet hard-hitting investigation of — ostensibly — racism, class prejudice and homophobia. Really, it has a more literary and universal theme: it doesn't so much tackle as tease out — caress, even — the subject of things that are difficult to talk about. Pungently Caribbean flavoured, but so much larger than that.

JMc

Canongate, £14.99

This Is How They Tell Me the World Ends: The Cyberweapons Arms Race by Nicole Perlroth

From Russia's attack on Ukraine's electricity grid to North Korea's assault on Sony, failures in cybersecurity have cost the world hundreds of millions of dollars. The ever-creeping internetification of things means that these failures will increasingly cost lives. Nicole Perlroth, a

New York Times

reporter,

[investigates the most dangerous "zero day" threats](#)

and the role — often pernicious — of government hackers and spy agencies. At times the hardbitten reporterese shades into Tom Clancy — "Daniel had left many questions unanswered. I figured this would be my last chance" — but if Perlroth is breathless the subject matter deserves it.

JMc

Bloomsbury, £14.99

What was the best philosophy and ideas book you read this year? Add your recommendations in the comments.

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[The Times and The Sunday Times best books of 2021](#)

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