

A student of life

Lucy Maddox talks to writer, philosopher, television presenter and entrepreneur **Alain de Botton**

Alain de Botton's first book was published at the tender age of 23: *Essays in Love*. Described as part history of a romance, part philosophical consolation, the book used a confessional style to draw the reader in whilst weaving in ideas from philosophical thought. From then on Alain De Botton tackled diverse subjects such as architecture, work, travel and other 'everyday' topics and dilemmas. The hallmark of his work is his ability to bring philosophy to bear on familiar conundrums, writing in an accessible style about big ideas. In 2008 he opened the 'The School of Life' in London (www.theschooloflife.com), a shop cum secular church where you can go to browse the books, find a therapist, or listen to talks from non-religious experts in philosophy and psychotherapy.

The School of Life recently published a series of self-help books. In their wake I interviewed Alain about the school, the books and his views on how psychology fits in.

What is the School of Life?

The School of Life is a strange kind of business that sells you ideas that you might need to get through your life. They might be ideas about how to cope with the challenges of career, or of family or of love or friendship. And these ideas might come in the form of lectures, seminars, books, aphorisms or psychotherapy. So it's a one-stop shop for a variety of mental guides – a source of wisdom if you like.

What inspired the idea?

It struck me that rather than complain about consumerism, the point is simply to widen our sense of what things we are selling one another – rather than simply clothes and other products, why not the things that we really desperately need in our minds and souls?

How have you felt about how the School of Life has been received?

The School has attracted extraordinary worldwide interest. We have journalists

from some part of the world almost every day – I think we're touching a nerve. People are intrigued by the possibility of gaining access to wisdom in a very democratic way. We are on the high street, we don't require entrance exams or connections.

Did it turn out how you imagined it?

It's been incredibly hard work to turn it into a reality – and I've been surprised by just how much administration every step requires. But more or less yes, it's been according to plan.

The 'School of Life' makes it sound like you have some experts on how to live life 'properly'. Is this how you see it?

Yes, there are experts in these things. Do they know everything? No. Are they semi-divine? No. However, there's no doubt that one can be an expert at careers or relationships or our connection to nature – just like you can be an expert at flying a plane or cooking sushi. We somehow imagine that psychological wisdom is just inbuilt or the result of divine inspiration, but in truth, like anything else, it's a question of training. The person we call 'a psychotherapist' is the most advanced person for understanding the human mind and its motivations, and we have plenty of those at the school.

Does the School draw on any psychological ideas as well as philosophical perspectives?

We pull in a range of disciplines and perspectives. We offer psychotherapy which follows what's been called the British school (people like Winnicott and Anna Freud).

Do you read any psychological research at all? Where do you get information

about psychological ideas from?

I read a lot of books by psychologists, but also a lot of poetry, novels and art history. My sources are diverse. Most of all, I study the life I lead.

How do you see the relationship between psychology and philosophy?

Philosophy has always spread itself across a range of areas, some of which now have their own titles. So what we know as astronomy used to be philosophy in ancient Greece. And what we know as psychology also used to sit under philosophy until the late 19th century. So in my eyes, psychology is just one bit of philosophy that has been particularly well developed in the 20th century.

What do you think are the three main things that psychology has to offer in terms of ideas about how to live our lives?

It tells us that our past has a huge influence on our present. It strongly suggests we learn from the past so as not to act out unconscious fantasies and thereby spoil our futures. And it's committed to the notion that rational understanding is the best way to cope with our neuroses.

Do you think there is anything that psychology is bad at? Are there particular areas that we shouldn't look to psychology for advice in?

Psychology as currently defined as an academic subject moves with painful slowness – because it is obsessed with scientific rigour. There are times when one wants psychologists to give us less research and more insight. We don't always need 'proof', sometimes it's more important to have ideas.

How about the three main things that philosophy has to offer?

Philosophy is committed to rational thought. It's historically sensitive, so philosophers tend to bat ideas around across centuries to each other. And by reading philosophy, we enter into mental perspectives we might otherwise have missed.

And is there anything that philosophy is bad at? Is it ever possible to over-think dilemmas?

Philosophy has very much gone down the wrong track from an academic point of view. It is not at all geared towards the dilemmas of real life and has therefore bored most of its audiences. As for over-

"There are times when one wants psychologists to give us less research and more insight"

thinking dilemmas, no, that's not possible: there is only ever thinking badly, not thinking too much. Good thinking knows its limits.

You've written on a wide range of topics, including love, work, travel, and now sex... What inspires you in your choice of topics?

I always look for problems! I am drawn to topics that have caused me pain or difficulty – and writing is a kind of self-help.

You've written about architecture as well. Do you think psychology has anything to contribute to architecture and physical environment?

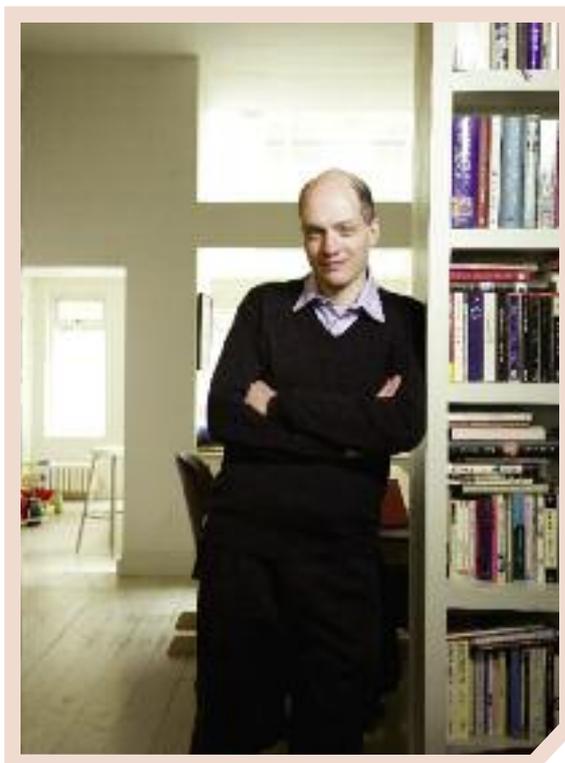
A psychological approach is definitely valuable in relation to architecture – by a psychological approach, I mean a focus on the state of mind of the user of a building. A question that architects rarely ask is 'Why would people like the space that I am designing?' The psychology of taste is notably absent from their agenda.

What made you want to publish a self-help series?

Because there is no more ridiculed literary genre than the self-help book. Admit that you regularly turn to such titles to help you cope with existence and you are liable to attract the scorn and suspicion of all who aspire to look well-educated and well-bred. As if on a mission to deny the category even a shred of respectability, the publishers of self-help books deck them out with lurid covers while booksellers entomb them near the Mind, Body, Spirit section, where they blur into an indistinguishable mass of sickly pink and purple spines.

It wasn't always like this. For two thousand years in the history of the West, the self-help book stood as a pinnacle of literary achievement. The Ancients were particularly adept practitioners. Epicurus wrote some 300 self-help books on almost every topic, including *On Love*, *On Justice* and *On Human Life*. The Stoic philosopher Seneca wrote volumes advising his fellow Romans how to cope with anger (the still very readable *On Anger*), how to deal with the death of a child (*Consolation to Marcia*) and how to overcome political and financial disgrace (*Letter to Lucilius*). It is no injustice to describe Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* as one of the finest works of self-help ever written, as relevant to someone facing a financial meltdown or the disintegration of an empire.

We need self-help books like never before, so it seems especially sad that our most serious writers are unalive to the possibilities of the genre and that the very idea of saying something 'useful' to a reader has become synonymous with



Alain de Botton
www.alaindebotton.com

banality. '20 tips from Othello on relationships' might seem like a stupid idea for a book, but that has more to do with the sort of contents generally filed under such a heading than anything intrinsic to the idea. Imagine what this could have been if Carlyle, Emerson or Virginia Woolf had had a shot? In our current moral and practical confusions, the self-help book is crying out to be reborn and rehabilitated. That's what we have done at the School of Life.

Tell us a bit about your book *How to Think More About Sex*.

It's an honest, melancholic, wry look at an area that's likely to be giving all of us a number of headaches down the years. It should leave the reader not problem-free, but at least aware that they are not alone.

Why do you think we need help with this in particular?

We labour under the mistaken idea that sex should be easy and simple, now that we are all 'liberated'. Far from it. It's always going to puzzle us, trouble us and make us ridiculous in our own eyes.

In my reading of the book, you seem to talk about our society as moving from repressed to liberated in recent years, in terms of sexual openness and social discourse. I was struck by how this contrasted with Foucault's ideas about sexual discourse, in particular his idea that historically we haven't been that repressed, and neither are we particularly liberated now, and that this is a social myth. Are you familiar with Foucault's arguments and what do you think?

Foucault's argument is provocative and I rehearse it on page 4 of the introduction to my book. There, you'll note that I explicitly point out that it is impossible for any society not to be repressed about sex, that repression is inevitable.

Psychological models often make links between people's past experiences and their current motivations. What from your childhood or past experiences has motivated you to write as you do?

My childhood was filled with anxiety, and writing is a way of mastering experiences and controlling them; writing and understanding is a method of self-soothing for me.

Where next? What plans do you have for your next project?

I am writing a book called *Art As Therapy*, exploring how art can be therapeutic for its audience.

Interviewees?

Over the years we have interviewed the cream of the crop in psychology: go to www.thepsychologist.org.uk and search for 'interview' to read them. But who have we missed? Who do you think would have an interesting personal and professional tale to tell?

E-mail your suggestions to the editor on jon.sutton@bps.org.uk or tweet us @psychmag.