

Who Was the Greatest Philosopher?

by [Kenneth Francis](#) (June 2026)



The Blasted Temple (Alberto Savinio, 1931)

In my opinion, Jesus Christ was the greatest philosopher of all time, obviously because I believe He is God and the power of his words in the Sermon on the Mount, and throughout the New Testament, is so profound that no other philosopher in history could surpass them (it's highly important to translate Jesus's *key words* in Greek to get the real meaning).

I believe if one lives one's life by the words of Christ, then, to invert W.B. Yeats' poem "The Second Coming", things will not fall apart, and the centre will hold firmly, with no anarchy loosed upon the world, and innocence will not be drowned.

But besides Christ, have you ever wondered who the greatest philosopher was? Some 40 years ago, I became interested in philosophy, and in 1987, the BBC aired a television series, presented by Bryan Magee, called *The Great Philosophers*.

It was compulsive viewing for me at the time, and it ran for 15 episodes, where Magee interviewed 15 contemporary philosophers, each of whom specialised in one of history's great philosophers. I watched all the episodes and bought the book version of the series, as well as watching a video of it many times.

The series covered philosophers from Plato to Wittgenstein. The final discussion was with the late John Searle, who I had great respect for, even though he was an atheist, because of his fine work on semantics, syntax, and consciousness.

To return to who was the greatest philosopher, I will briefly name some of the philosophers whose biographies and worldviews were outlined on the TV series, including who I believe to be the greatest philosopher since the ancient Greeks and the Medieval period.

To cut to the chase, Michael R. Ayers was interviewed about the Irish philosopher George Berkeley, who was born in County Kilkenny, Ireland, on 12th March 1685. He studied at Trinity College, Dublin.

I believe Berkeley to be the greatest philosopher compared to the others mentioned in the series, even though I don't fully agree with everything he wrote.

His philosophy was called Idealism, but it should have been

called Idea-ism, as his work deals with the ideas we have and the question of the existence of the external world and God's Mind. The core of his philosophy is laid out in his book, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*.

Being reasonable for Berkeley is being anti-sceptical and acknowledging that the only 'real' things that exist in the world are spiritual beings who are created by an infinite Spirit, God. Put simply, the whole of reality is mental (in more ways than one!). But the appearance of the external world feels physical.

According to Berkeley's Idealism, that proverbial 'tree that fell in the forest' did make a sound after all, as witnessed by God. As Berkeley famously said: "To be is to be perceived." (For a more in-depth analysis of Berkeley, read the [essay](#) I wrote in *New English Review* in August 2017.)

Unfortunately, Berkeley's reputation on a certain moral issue has in recent times taken a hit because he owned slaves, and as a result of this, his name was removed from Trinity College Dublin's library.

The Woke university said: "[The] decision was taken by the University's Board following several months of research, analysis and public consultation overseen by the Trinity Legacies Review Working Group, which is considering legacy issues on a case-by-case basis. Trinity decided that the continued use of the Berkeley name on its library is inconsistent with the University's core values of human dignity, freedom, inclusivity, and equality."

Slavery was, and still is, a moral abomination. I was disappointed to learn that Berkeley owned enslaved people, and it is understandable why this aspect of his life has attracted criticism in recent years. My main interest, however, is in his philosophical ideas rather than his personality, although there are times when a philosopher's character and conduct

become relevant to the discussion, a point to which I shall return later.

But great philosophical ideas aside for a moment, I believe the greatest prose was produced by the grumpy atheists Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Schopenhauer (1788-1860). If you want to feel the hairs on the back of your neck 'stand up' or get 'goosebumps' on your arms, then read Nietzsche's *Parable of the Madman* and Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*. Anyone who has read the writing style and profundity of such works, will never forget them. The literary poetic substance of these writings is truly spellbinding.

Nietzsche writes about us murdering God. The result? "All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns?"

Schopenhauer writes about the blood-soaked jungles and plains of the animal kingdom, where in all five continents, every second of every minute of every hour of every day, thousands upon thousands of carnivorous beasts are tearing each other to pieces alive in a world of perpetual screaming.

Prose aside and a return to philosophical ideas, Schopenhauer is a bit like Berkeley. Schopenhauer's philosophy is described as the following: It is impossible to experience things-in-themselves. All we can experience are our ideas about things. For example, just as John Locke and the indirect realists thought light bounces off an object and into our eyes – how are we to know that what we are seeing is the object itself? So, all we know of the world is nothing but an idea. This is where Berkeley inserts God's Mind into the picture.

Finally, we come to the last interview with John Searle, who said that Wittgenstein wrote that the important things in

language cannot be said, referring to religious experience, ethics and the Arts, which I believe most certainly can be said, but he wrote that we cannot say anything meaningful about these subjects.

There is something faintly melancholy about the image of Wittgenstein spending his evenings alone in cinemas watching westerns while simultaneously insisting that the most important things cannot really be said.

I'm aware that when discussing a philosopher, I should stick to the philosophy and not 'the man,' but I think in Wittgenstein's case there is some justification for commenting on his character and appearance. Unlike most Western philosophers, Wittgenstein projected an almost monastic image, which only added to his mystique.



Wittgenstein in the early 1920s

So, who was Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) and what does his philosophy say? I believe Wittgenstein's philosophy was a case of *The Emperor's New Clothes*.

Wittgenstein possessed a powerful and unusual presence. The

photographs reveal an intense, unsmiling figure whose admirers often described him in almost reverential terms. Whether justified or not, I have always found something unsettling about the combination of alleged intellectual brilliance, personal severity, and the extraordinary devotion he inspired among followers.

However, physical appearances aside, back to his philosophy: my real problem with Wittgenstein is that his ideas strike me as a precursor to some of the intellectual fashions that later emerged under post-modernism. I appreciate that many scholars would dispute this connection, but I find little appeal in philosophical approaches that focus heavily on language while appearing to leave objective truth beyond our grasp. As a Christian, I cannot embrace a worldview in which Truth is reduced to perception or linguistic convention.

In my co-written book with Theodore Dalrymple and the late Samuel Hux, *Neither Trumpets Nor Violins* (a link to the book is in my profile below), I've dedicated a chapter to the question of Wittgenstein's popularity, authenticity, rock-star-type fame, and how I rate him as a philosopher.

Wittgenstein was deeply suspicious of sweeping metaphysical claims about the world. I sometimes wonder whether he was entirely consistent in applying that scepticism to his own conclusions.

But to give a brief edited version on his main book, here is how I'd sum up his reputation as a philosopher: He wrote the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and many of his later writings, particularly *Philosophical Investigations*, appear to stand in tension with its central ideas.

The book would have made Jacques [Derrida](#) blush (I jest, Derrida was worse). Jesus said: "But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one." (Matthew 5:37)

In *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein concludes: “My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.”

After reading this, I threw away the metaphorical ladder but only transcended these gobbledegook word-salad propositions when I found Christ Jesus again after an earlier adult life of meaningless atheism.

Ultimately, there is something of Theatre of the Absurd about Wittgenstein’s writings. He was bad-tempered, abrasive, and by many accounts difficult to deal with, yet these qualities appeared only to increase his appeal among certain academic admirers. British academia has never been entirely immune to intellectual celebrity worship. Nowadays, the corridors of Western universities have become Theatre of the Absurd United, obsessed with racism, gender, and diversity. But don’t just take my word for it: [Cambridge University’s War on Free Speech](#).

The full list of the philosophers mentioned in the BBC series included: *Plato; Aristotle; Medieval Philosophy; Descartes; Spinoza; Leibniz; Locke and Berkeley; Hume; Kant; Hegel and Marx; Schopenhauer; Nietzsche; Husserl, Heidegger and Existentialism; The American Pragmatists; A.J. Ayer, Frege, and Russell; Wittgenstein.*

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