

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN TOLD THAT YOU ASK TOO MANY QUESTIONS?

I HAVE. MY NAME IS JAMIA, AND GROWING UP, I LOVED NOTHING MORE THAN DEBATING THEORIES ABOUT THE WORLD. As the child of two professors who hungrily read the newspaper each day, I begged my mother to speed up her ritual of sipping a steamy cup of lemon tea while reading the news, so I could review the headlines and then check out the comics.

I always wanted to know about the root causes of things, beyond what I could ask a teacher or my parents throughout the day. I delighted in getting to the heart of a matter and then finding another rabbit hole to swoosh down into a new portal of information and imagination. Looking back, I realise that the most helpful information I received came in the form of books.

Reading other people's ideas inspired me to write down my own thoughts and gave me the ability to think critically, to challenge myself, and sometimes, to change my mind when a seed of wisdom bloomed into a garden of new ideas.

DO YOU FEEL THE FIRE OF CURIOSITY ABOUT THE 'HOWS' AND THE 'WHYS' OF THE WORLD? IF SO, KEEP READING.

Eventually, my parents started giving me additional 'homework' after my schoolwork was done. After I asked why most of the big thinkers in my school books were mostly white men from Europe, they asked me to write book reports and organise presentations at home about diverse writers, poets, philosophers, scientists, theorists, and visionaries from around the world.

The questions are often more important than the answers.

This question about why we didn't learn about more thinkers from communities as diverse as ours preoccupied me, and as an adult it led me to work as the executive director and publisher for the Feminist Press, an educational nonprofit organisation founded to amplify diverse, feminist perspectives.

We make sense of the world around us based on thoughts and beliefs that we hear in our homes, schools, the media, museums, and – for some of us – in places of worship. But it's up to us to develop our own theories about the world rather than simply absorbing what we're told. We need to consider all sorts of facts and ideas, and connect the dots in a way that makes sense for us.

One way we can practice being thinkers and truth-seekers is by reading about, talking about, and sharing ideas. This is called '<u>philosophy</u>'. The word philosophy means 'love of wisdom', and anyone who wonders about big questions on life and the universe is a philosopher. By choosing this book, you have shown that you are a philosopher, too! Even if you don't look or sound like the people who are usually upheld as the best and brightest geniuses in your textbooks, in the library, or on TV, your questions and thoughts are just as meaningful.

In this book, you'll discover that the questions are often more important than the answers. And you'll develop your skills in considering a variety of ways of looking at an issue to decide where you stand. Maybe you'll even come up with your own big idea or new question. If so, congratulations! Your inquiring mind is what is needed to help create a better world.

Look up names in **bold** on the timeline (pages 58–59), or words that are <u>underlined</u> in the glossary (page 62) to help with understanding.

So welcome to this book, and the adventure of the mind that we'll take together.

THE BIG IDEAS GUARANTEE: What happens when we disagree?

AS WE BEGIN OUR JOURNEY TOGETHER, WE MUST BE CLEAR ON THE 'BIG IDEAS GUARANTEE' – THAT WE ALL HAVE QUESTIONS, BUT WE WON'T ALWAYS HAVE THE SAME ANSWERS.

Ideas are powerful and informative, whether we absorb them, challenge them, or let them go. As a writer, speaker and activist, I've spent a lot of time exploring important issues, both with people who share my viewpoints and with those who strongly disagree.

Although most humans value peace, freedom, safety, good health, partnership, education, and protecting the planet, we often have different approaches and solutions for how to achieve these goals. While there is always much to debate, we can often find common ground through shared experiences and points of connection.

It can be frustrating when we don't see eye to eye with people in our community, especially our loved ones, but talking openly and respectfully about differences of opinion can help us learn a lot about ourselves and others. Practise these tried-and-tested tactics for engaging in debates and courageous discussions:

We all have questions, but we won't always have the same answers.

• Turn up and be present. Don't dismiss a discussion just because you disagree with what someone is saying.

• Listen deeply without interrupting. Be prepared to learn that you might be wrong about something, and don't assume the worst of the person you are talking to.

• Mind your body language. Your non-verbal communication tells a story, too.

• Look for common ground and areas of agreement, and acknowledge them with a spirit of goodwill.

• Remember that courage is contagious – when you explore an issue with an open mind, it inspires others' willingness to grow, too.

• Acknowledge to yourself that we all have biases. Try to release your own, and then listen deeply.

• Respect insights from people who have been affected or impacted by an issue directly, or have lived experience of a topic.

• Don't talk down to people. Be humble and assume they are just as smart and worthy of being heard as you are.

• Take responsibility. We all make mistakes and sometimes the impact of our words doesn't reflect our good intentions. Be ready to honestly acknowledge if you have caused offence – remember that it won't be the first or last time a human has done this.

• Be curious and ask open-ended questions without an agenda. If you find yourself having a knee-jerk reaction, take a deep breath and ask a question to learn more.

• Be confident about your ideas, but remain humble. Remember: 'No one knows everything, together we know a lot.' (Anti-opression Resource Training Alliance)

• Set healthy boundaries. If a conversation turns into bullying, name-calling, or otherwise becomes unsafe or unhealthy, end it. Get support and seek connection from a trusted adult, friend, or ally.

You can add to this list of tactics as you build up experience in discussing big ideas. What have you learned that helps you during disagreements?







2

LIFE

WHY DO WE EXIST?

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE DIE?

WHAT IS HUMAN NATURE?

WHY DO WE LOVE?

WHY DO WE EXIST?

STRETCH YOUR ARMS IN FRONT OF YOU AND STARE AT YOUR HANDS FOR A MINUTE, SHARPENING YOUR GAZE WITH EVERY SECOND. Do you see an entire universe within the lines, freckles, pores, or colours on your skin?

If you have ever wondered why we exist, you're in good company!

Khalil Gibran, a Lebanese-American writer and artist, said 'In one drop of water are found all the secrets of all the oceans; in one aspect of you are found all the aspects of existence.' When we look at ourselves closely, we are reminded that we too are matter. Our cells are made up of atoms of elements such as hydrogen, carbon, nitrogen, and oxygen. We take up space like other living things that can be touched and seen. But does that mean that we're real? How did we get here? And what are we supposed to be doing?

If you have ever wondered why we exist, you're in good company! Across the globe, theorists, scientists, and spiritual leaders have done the same for thousands of years, debating questions and developing their ideas. Yes, the basic facts of how you came into the world are clear – through your biological parents, who were born because of your grandparents, who entered the world due to your great-grandparents, who emerged as a result of older ancestors. But there is more to the story.

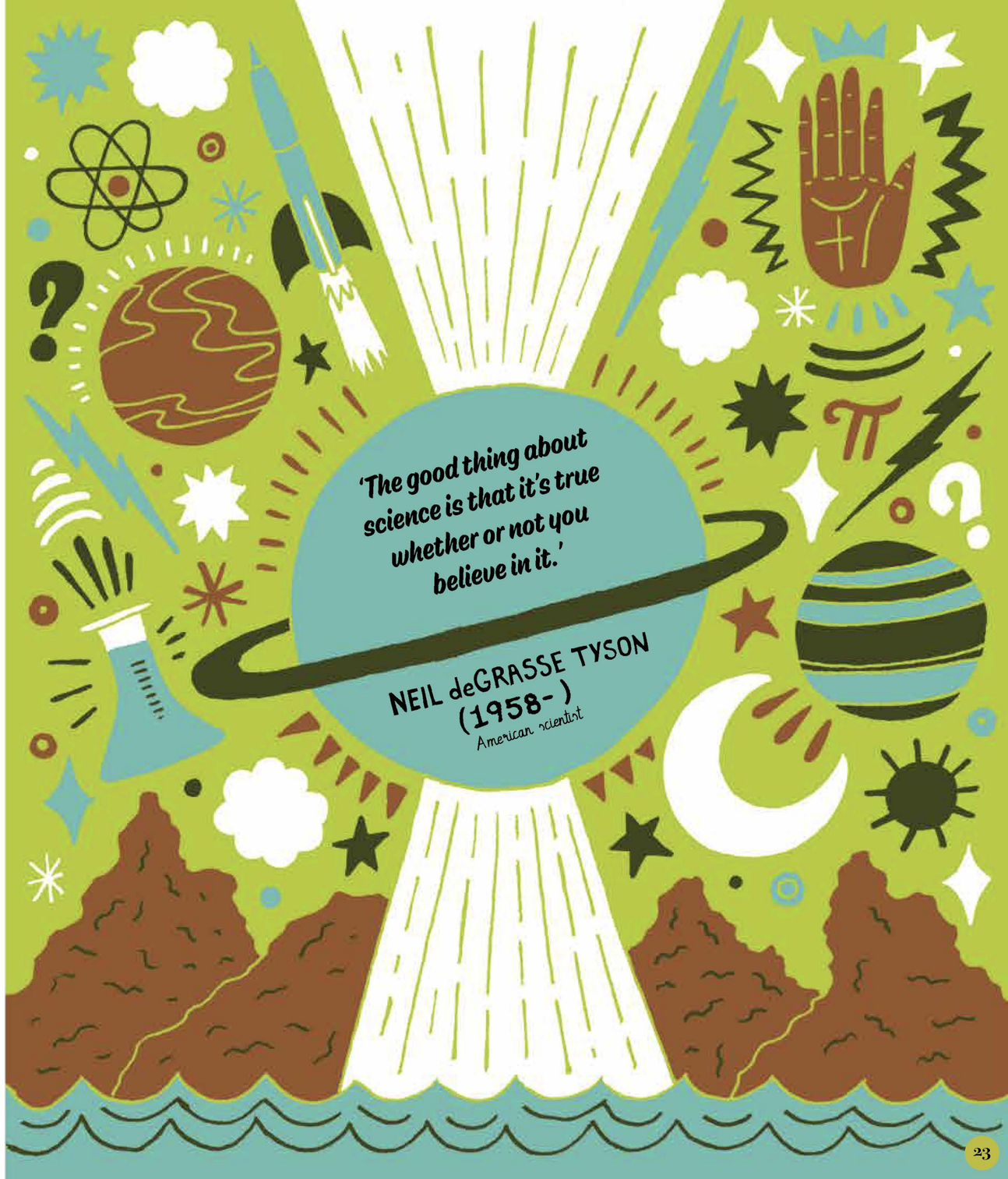
Humanity's origin story differs depending on who you ask, but according to the laws of science everything that exists on Earth – including you – began as stardust. Scientists understand that the universe came into being about 13.8 billion years ago, with a grand explosion called the Big Bang. Nine billion years later, massive stars became so intensely hot and dense that they exploded, scattering parts across the universe that birthed the planets in our solar system – including our home, Earth.

Long before your earliest relatives took their first breath, the fiery force that created the stars and galaxies helped form every element in the periodic table, and life on our planet eventually took shape. As discussed on page 14, our current physical bodies came from a long process of change and adaptation that started from our earliest East African ancestors, primates who existed around 3 million years ago and evolved with the environment as they migrated worldwide.

Humans have pondered whether science, a higher power (or God), the environment, a 'vital spark', or a mix of any of these ignited our being. Great thinkers from **Aristotle** and **Parmenides of Elea** to physicist **Stephen Hawking** have explored whether anything that existed before the forces that rocked the world into reality came from nothing… or something powerful.

'My goal is simple. It is a complete understanding of the universe, why it is as it is, and why it exists at all.'

Hawking said, 'My goal is simple. It is a complete understanding of the universe, why it is as it is, and why it exists at all.' **Edwin Hubble,** astronomer, had a similar thought: 'Equipped with his five senses, man explores the universe around him and calls the adventure science.'



WHAT IS HUMAN NATURE?



THINK FOR A MOMENT ABOUT WHAT MAKES YOU HUMAN.

How do you know you are different from any other animal on Earth? Before you decide that this exercise seems silly – because you wouldn't even be doing it if you were a kitten or a kangaroo – consider the heart of this question.

For ages, thinkers have explored how we, as humans, are distinct from other animals, which have also evolved over time. Biological theories such as heredity explain how our emotions and actions have connections to the genes passed down by our ancestors, who adapted to their environment just as we continue to do today.

What makes humans distinct is our ability to reason, our drive to live together in community, and our powerful imaginations.

Many years before these scientific facts were common knowledge, Aristotle declared that what makes humans distinct from other animals is our ability to reason, our drive to live together in communities, and our powerful imagination. He also explored the idea that human nature is about finding meaning and purpose, which continues to be debated within many philosophical and spiritual spaces and is rooted in the question of whether we are driven by 'nature' or 'nurture'.

The 'nature vs. nurture' discussion considers whether we are *born with* the characteristics of human nature or whether *we are dependent on our surrounding environment* to help us develop our human nature over time. Most scientists and philosophers today understand the reality to be more complicated than just nature or just nurture.

Anthropologists have identified characteristics that all humans share beyond borders and cultures, like walking upright, using tools to prepare food, sharing and helping, adapting to changes in environment, and creating language and symbols to communicate. But some thinkers don't believe human nature exists at all. They point out the characteristics and behaviours we share with other animals – especially our ape ancestors. However, it's hard to argue that humans are exactly the same as other primates. Apart from being tailless and less hairy than our primate relatives, humans have a more developed brain. The difference in the size of our brains contributes to how we speak, our higher level of self-awareness, and problem-solving skills. Studies have shown that humans and great apes can recognise themselves (and therefore their existence) in the mirror. But the type of consciousness we think about when it comes to making decisions about our sense of right and wrong involves a different experience of self-knowledge, beyond a simple understanding that a mirror shows us an image of ourselves.

The debate about whether it's human nature to be good, bad, moral, community-driven, or focused on the self is multilayered.

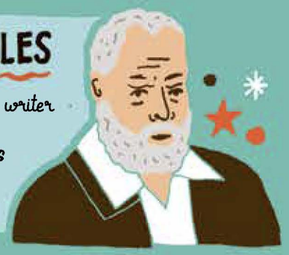
The debate about whether it's human nature to be good, bad, moral, community-driven, or focused on the self is multilayered and depends on many factors, including culture and environment. What makes the most sense to you?



PLATO

(428-348 BCE) Ancient Greek philosopher

'To prefer evil to good is not in human nature; and when a man is compelled to choose one of two evils, no one will choose the greater when he might have the less.'



ORSON WELLES

(1915-1985) American actor and writer

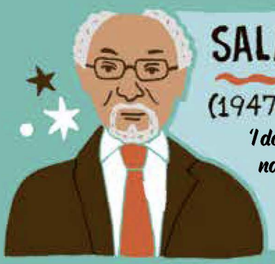
'Race hate isn't human nature; race hate is the abandonment of human nature.'



AGATHA CHRISTIE

(1890-1976) British author

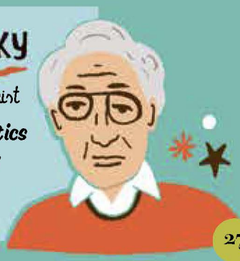
'One always has hope for human nature.'



SALMAN RUSHDIE

(1947-) British-Indian novelist

'I do think that there is such a thing as human nature, and that the things that we have in common are perhaps greater than the things that divide us.'



NOAM CHOMSKY

(1928 –) American linguist

'Humans have certain properties and characteristics which are intrinsic to them, just as every other organism does. That's human nature.'



Karl Marx
(1818–1883)

German philosopher and socialist

'Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.' (A painkiller against hardship.)

Maya Angelou
(1928–2014)

American author, poet, and activist

'I found that I knew not only that there was God but that I was a child of God, when I understood that, when I comprehended that, more than that, when I internalized that, ingested that, I became courageous. If God loves me, if God made everything from leaves to seals and oak trees, then what is it I can't do?'



IS GOD REAL?

I'LL NEVER FORGET WHEN ONE OF MY FRIENDS WHISPERED TO ME IN SUNDAY SCHOOL, 'I'M AFRAID TO ASK MY PARENTS, BUT HOW DO WE KNOW THAT GOD IS REAL?' If this is a question you've asked yourself but been afraid to speak out loud, you're not alone. It was the first time that I'd thought about this question myself, because my family taught me to always put God first.

Years later, when a close friend told me that he'd asked his rabbi the same question during his bar mitzvah, I feared what he would say happened next. I was sure that he would get into trouble for questioning the existence of God in front of a religious leader. I based this on my experiences attending a Christian high school and growing up in Saudi Arabia, a country ruled by Islamic law. Instead, he surprised me with the answer he had actually received. 'Doubt is the foundation of faith,' the rabbi had said to him, with a knowing grin.

I have thought about this exchange many times over the years, when I've bumped up against my own crises of faith. I've often wondered how to make sense of how the merciful, compassionate, and loving God in which I believe could allow atrocities such as racism, hatred, and war to happen. Now, I accept doubt as a pathway to learning about, and connecting with, spirituality. I'm sharing this story because the answers to this question are deeply personal – and can shift as we go through our lives.

'Doubt is the foundation of faith.'

Humans have been asking this question for generations, and there's no harm in asking questions to seek understanding. In the earliest religions, many people believed in the higher force of one single creator or multiple gods. As humanity began exploring reason, humans began to ask more questions about whether it can be proved that a supreme being exists.

Aristotle taught that God is the one entity that was not created by something outside of itself. He thought that unlike human beings, who exist because our parents made us, God did not rely on any other being or force for its creation. Thinkers such as the Italian monk and philosopher **St. Anselm** argued that thinking about God proved God's existence, while the Italian friar **Thomas Aquinas** claimed, 'God could have made the universe without humans and then made them.' Centuries later, **Baruch Spinoza**, inspired by the medieval Jewish philosopher **Maimonides** (mahy-**mon**-i-deez), said that God is the cause of all things.

As time went on, more thinkers such as socialist philosopher **Karl Marx** disagreed, and argued that religion could be harmful: he described it as is the 'opium of the people', a drug used to control people who are dependent on the 'illusions' it provides. Marx believed that religion is a painkiller against hardship: that the idea of God and an afterlife numbs the harsh reality of injustice. Some people feel sure, as Marx did, that there is nothing beyond this physical world. But others might perceive God as nature, or the force of science.

People who disbelieve in the idea that God or gods exist are atheists. Agnosticism is the belief that it's not possible to know or understand whether or not God or gods are real. Agnostics may or may not believe in God. Like any belief system, people relate to atheism and agnosticism in different ways. Some people are atheists because they were born into cultures where ideas about God were never spoken about. Others say that logic, science, and reason show proof that a God or gods are make-believe.

You might think of yourself as spiritual, religious, atheist, agnostic, humanist (someone who places more importance on humanity than on any divine power) – or not able to put a label on it. Wherever you land, exploring your own beliefs is a deeply personal journey, and no one has the right to judge or persecute you for what you do or do not believe.

WHAT IS IMAGINATION?

OUR IMAGINATION GIVES US THE FREEDOM TO EXPLORE ENDLESS POSSIBILITIES WITHOUT ANY LIMITS. It is a powerful and useful part of the mind that allows us to expand our horizons, and envision new pathways or potential realities.

Our imaginations are alive, fluid, open and full of possibility if we allow ourselves to play, make new things, and explore fresh ideas. Growing up, I relied on my imagination to feed my curiosity and to act as an anchor that brought me back to the sanctuary of my own nature, thoughts and dreams. It helped me feel safe, confident, and free whenever someone told me I couldn't do or say something because I was a girl, or because I was born with a disability. It provided comfort and healing, while also offering me ways to tap into my strengths, embrace my dreams, and accept myself. As **Muhammad Ali** said, 'The [person] who has no imagination has no wings.'

When physicist **Albert Einstein** said 'imagination is more important than knowledge,' he understood that knowledge could be gained with time and practice, but imagination is the fire that fuels creativity and change. He argued that we can't 'solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them,' calling on us to apply both reason and imagination when asking and answering big questions.

'Imagination is more important than knowledge.'

Imagination is about world-making. It helps us understand ourselves and everything outside of us with a fresh perspective. That's why humans connect deeply with storytelling, fantasy and lore (traditional stories and knowledge). American science-fiction writer **Octavia E. Butler** acknowledged the importance of pairing knowledge with creativity to capture imaginations through her work: 'Fantasy is totally wide open; all you really have to do is follow the rules you've set. But if you're writing about science, you have to first learn what you're writing about.'

Imagination is about world-making.

Although many great minds have insisted on the importance of imagination, practices in our schools and the workplace don't always mirror this mindset. British educator **Ken Robinson** has spoken about how we are born with creativity and 'get educated out of it.' He argues that being imaginative is as important as being able to read and write, but that schools currently focus on training children to be good, obedient workers, rather than encouraging their creativity and diverse ways of thinking.

Robinson's belief that 'imagination is the source of all human achievement' is at the heart of the imagination-led 'learning revolution' that he wants to see take place in schools and beyond.

What do you think? How might we use our imagination to grow at school and beyond?

