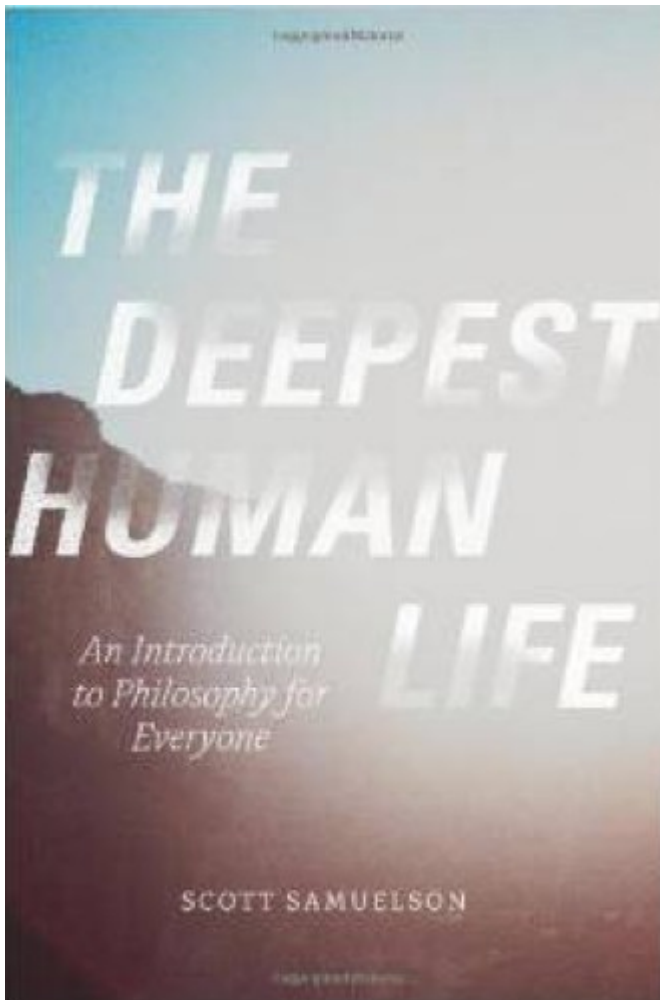


The Deepest Human Life, by Scott Samuelson

reviewed by [Gordon D. Marino](#) in the [October 15, 2014](#) issue

In Review



The Deepest Human Life

By Scott Samuelson

University of Chicago Press

The word *philosophy* is derived from the Greek for love of wisdom—not knowledge, mind you, but wisdom. It is cliché to moan that academic philosophy is taken up with abstruse and perhaps insoluble puzzles—secular versions of wondering how many

angels can dance on the head of a pin. Socrates famously said that the unexamined life is not worth living. Perhaps the examined life is not worth it either. Why not study something practical instead of spinning your wheels on pseudo problems, as the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein put it? That is the suggestion philosopher Peter Unger drives toward in his recently published cannonade, *Empty Ideas*.

The Deepest Human Life is an elegantly written, impassioned, and sometimes disjointed plea on behalf of philosophy. Author Scott Samuelson, a philosophy professor at Kirkwood Community College in Iowa City, invokes poets, novelists, and theologians to defend the dialectical process that Socrates imparted, obliquely arguing that no matter who you are or what you are doing, self-examination will enrich your world and nurture “the deepest human life.”

Seneca, one of the many thinkers to appear in these pages, taught, “He who studies with a philosopher should take home with him some good thing every day. He should daily return home a sounder man, or on the way to becoming sounder.” If this does not happen, if the pupil only accumulates some knowledge or perhaps becomes an expert in intellectual jujitsu, he is wasting his time. Concurring with Seneca, Samuelson writes, “All ideas under philosophical discussion, in the end, must be judged on their ability to help us live well.” For Samuelson, philosophical inquiry—intellectually probing beneath the floorboards of our basic assumptions—will help us live better lives by augmenting our sense of meaning.

The Deepest Human Life would be an excellent companion volume for anyone interested in a study of philosophy’s greatest hits. It opens with a scintillating spate of pages on Plato’s *Euthyphro* and *Apology*. As Samuelson reads these classic texts, the basic question the gadfly of Athens let loose was: Do you worship goodness or power?

Many professors claim to learn from their students while inwardly denying the claim. But the enchanting Samuelson takes us along to class with him in these lively pages. Unlike other members of the philosophers’ guild, he seldom serves up an abstraction without an accompanying concrete example culled from in-class comments and student papers.

For instance, when discussing Immanuel Kant’s moral theory, Samuelson informs us that for Kant, consequences are of no moral consequence. We cannot control what happens in the world. On the plane of right and wrong, it is only our intentions that

matter. Having delivered this riff, Samuelson recalls a time when one of his students took him aside and asked, “with startling passion, ‘Is it true what Kant says? Is it true . . . that the consequences of an action are irrelevant?’” We then read that this ardent student was the mother of a young boy who died in an operation she had reluctantly agreed to—an operation that might have been required because of an injury inflicted by the boy’s abusive father, to whom she was married.

One of Samuelson’s strongest chapters is on the Stoics, those porch-sitting cogitators to whom St. Paul brought the good news of Christianity. The Stoics took Socrates for their lodestar and included the likes of Epictetus, Cato, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius. They stressed the use of reason for discernment and bringing one’s life into harmony with the grand logic of the universe. Stoicism was all about achieving inner peace in a topsy-turvy political world. It was philosophy as therapy. Through study and practice, students of this austere school aimed at gaining control over their desires, emotions, and expectations. They also reasoned that if people are unable to take their own lives, they are prisoners in this world. So one of the cardinal lessons of stoicism was that freedom requires the ability to commit suicide.

After outlining the major points of the Stoic thinkers, Samuelson enumerates some concrete techniques for those who might be interested in becoming Stoics: study, meditation in the morning, starting small, having a sense of humor, and reviewing the day at bedtime.

One of the many virtues of this study is that it not only draws from Eastern and Western thinkers, it brings sages from various traditions into dialogue with one another. Samuelson, who seems to have read just about everyone, wheels the Sunni mystic Al-Ghazali into position to help us grasp the significance of Descartes’s search for certainty in his *Meditations*. He seats Zen Buddhists across the table from Pascal to illuminate Pascal’s famous statement, “The sole cause of man’s unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room.” Read: does not know how to resist the impulse to text, tweet, or jump on Facebook.

What of the relationship between Athens and Jerusalem, between faith and reason? As a youngster growing up in the Midwest, Samuelson attended church every Sunday. The population of his hometown was dwindling, so he was introduced to the faith in a mixed Presbyterian and Methodist congregation. He confides that in this church and in the community around it he observed hypocrisies and contradictions but concludes, “When I think about religious institutions and all their foolishness, or

of philosophy classes, for that matter, and all theirs, I have nothing but gratitude.” Samuelson adds, “They kept us in contact with the triggers of the spirit”—fires capable of igniting a sense of awe that lifts you out of time, transfiguring the world and perhaps even your feelings about the guy who cut you off in traffic. According to this true believer, the unexamined life is a life devoid of meaning, and the ability to find questions where others locate only tame certainties is an ability sure to magnify your sense that life is meaningful and even sacred.

A philosopher poet like Kierkegaard would furrow his brow at the fact that this self-proclaimed “practical mystic” has transformed the experience of awe into a god term. For Kierkegaard, puzzlement is only a part of the picture. On his reckoning, it is only by translating our ethico-religious ideas into the medium of action that we can begin to own and understand them. There are, in short, more decisive moments in life than being spellbound by questions such as: Why is there something rather than nothing? And yet this compelling story of philosophy nudges the reader toward the conviction that a sense of awe, which Samuelson lionizes and invites, will transform more than our ways of thinking.