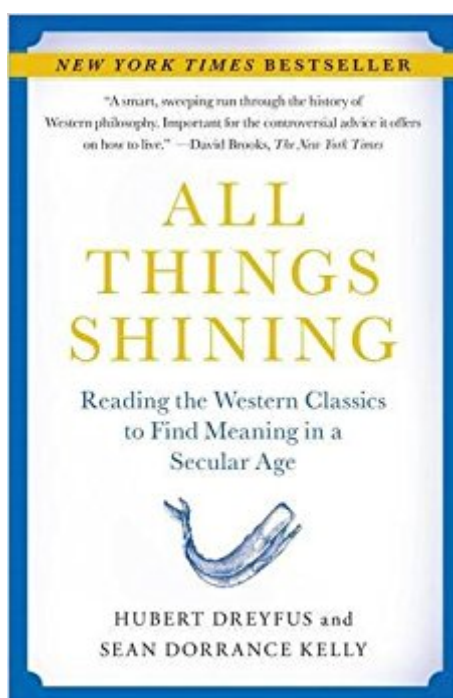


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# All Things Shining: Reading The Western Classics To Find Meaning In A Secular Age



## Synopsis

Well on its way to becoming a classic itself, this inspirational book is “a smart, sweeping run through the history of Western philosophy. Important for the way it illuminates life today and for the controversial advice it offers on how to live” (David Brooks, *The New York Times*). “What constitutes human excellence?” and “What is the best way to live a life?” These are questions that human beings have been asking since the beginning of time. In their critically acclaimed book, *All Things Shining*, Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly argue that our search for meaning was once fulfilled by our responsiveness to forces greater than ourselves, whether one God or many. These forces drew us in and imbued the ordinary moments of life with wonder and gratitude. Dreyfus and Kelly argue in this thought-provoking work that as we began to rely on the power of our own independent will we lost our skill for encountering the sacred. Through their original and transformative discussion of some of the greatest works of Western literature, from Homer’s *Odyssey* to Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Dreyfus and Kelly reveal how we have lost our passionate engagement with the things that gave our lives purpose, and show how, by reading our culture’s classics anew, we can once again be drawn into intense involvement with the wonder and beauty of the world. Well on its way to becoming a classic itself, this inspirational book will change the way we understand our culture, our history, our sacred practices, and ourselves.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Many people in today's world do not recognize "shining" things when they see them. Instead, feelings of loss, sadness, angst, and despair prevail. Dreyfus and Kelly lament that fact and respond to the situation by introducing (or reintroducing) readers to several literary classics of the Western world. With a balanced mix of philosophy and literature, the authors highlight works like Melville's *Moby Dick*, Homer's *Odyssey*, and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The organizing principle is mostly thematic, with chapters dealing with nihilism, polytheism, monotheism, and autonomy. The work is not religious in the traditional sense. Jesus and Christianity are brought into the discussion only occasionally as conversation partners, and the target audience includes people who would rather listen to Immanuel Kant than the Apostle Paul. Throughout, the tone is only barely academic. The authors assume their readers have no prior knowledge of the works they discuss. The conclusion is hopeful that one can live a life worth living in a secular age. It starts with recognizing "shining" things when we encounter them. This book is proof that some of the Western classics can help us do just that.

--Wade Osburn --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"Occasionally brave philosophers do leap out of their professional lanes and illuminate things for the wider public. Hubert Dreyfus of Berkeley and Sean Dorrance Kelly of Harvard have just done this with their new book, *All Things Shining*. They take a smart, sweeping run through the history of Western philosophy. But their book is important for the way it illuminates life today and for the controversial advice it offers on how to live. A rejection of the excessive individualism of the past several decades, the emphasis on maximum spiritual freedom. In this, it's a harbinger of future philosophies to come."--David Brooks, *The New York Times*"Fascinating. Even if you don't agree that we are caught in an age of nihilistic indecision, if you attune yourself to the authors' energetic intelligence and deep engagement with key texts in the West, you will have much to be grateful for."-- Michael Roth, *The New York Times*"An inspirational book but a highly intelligent and impassioned one. The authors set out to analyze our contemporary nihilism the better to remedy it. "All Things Shining" provides a concise history of Western thought, beginning with Homer and concluding with Descartes and Kant. But there are extended discussions as well of such contemporary authors as the late David Foster Wallace and, even more startling, of "chick lit" novelist Elizabeth Gilbert. The authors' general theme, and lament, is that we are no longer "open to the world." We fall prey either to "manufactured confidence" that sweeps aside all obstacles or to a kind of addictive passivity, typified by "blogs and social networking sites." Both are equally unperceptive. What makes their case finally compelling is their insistence on the importance of

openness, on attentiveness to the given moment, on what they call "a fully embodied, this-worldly kind of sacred." If, as they claim, "the story of how we lost touch with these sacred practices is the hidden history of the West," they have offered some small but shining hints on how we might hope to recover them." --Eric Ormsby, *The Wall Street Journal*"Fascinating insights about the search for meaning in our time, and the threat of nihilism. All Things Shining raises fundamental questions about the religious and ethical developments of humanity since the Axial Age. This book tackles big issues, ones that really matter in our lives today." --Charles Taylor, author of *A Secular Age*

"In All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age, two distinguished philosophers, Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, have written an extraordinary, ambitious, and provocative tour de force that frames one of the central questions of our age: how we have passed from the intense and meaningful lives of Homer's world to the indecision and sadness that too often characterizes modern times. This is compelling reading because in examining the great literary works produced in the history of the West, the authors find new ways of configuring issues of choice, autonomy, fanaticism, solace, and most importantly, the ties that bind us to the past. The book is both brief and yet remarkably comprehensive as it delves into the transcendent values of the classic works that have helped to advance modern thought and inform the development of the Western world. I found myself particularly fascinated by Chapter 5, "The Attractions and Dangers of Autonomy." As with the rest of the book, reading this chapter, I could hardly put it down." --Vartan Gregorian, President, Carnegie Corporation of New York

"Dreyfus and Kelly would initiate us into a this-worldly piety of wonder and gratitude; of attunement to moments when something transcendently excellent shines forth in the mundane. The new age that Dreyfus and Kelly hope for is a polytheistic and basically aristocratic corrective to the leveling of modern culture, which they attribute to the mindsets of monotheism and technology. You will be arrested by their reading of the tradition, and of our current situation. If you find yourself high-fiving strangers when Tom Brady connects with Randy Moss in the end zone from downtown, or would like to, this book is for you." --Matthew Crawford, author of *Shop Class as Soulcraft*

"There is a world out there that is as concealed as it is crucial to the good life. Dreyfus and Kelly have lifted the veil with pedagogical skill and striking insights. It's a world of things shining that can lend grace and depth to our lives. The book is itself a shining thing." --Albert Borgmann, author of *Real American Ethics*

"Stunning! This is one of the most surprising, demanding, and beautiful books I have ever read. My compliments gentleman, and I hope thousands of others share my admiration and awe." --Charles Van

Doren, author of *A History of Knowledge* --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

What is meaning? What makes something meaningful? The questions of whether it was god or the gods or anything outside of ourselves or whether we create all the meaning there is, is taken on in a clear well written and documented tale. How does one live a meaningful life in this secular age? I doubt if anyone who has not already pondered these questions will read *All Things Shining*. And there's the rub. Getting lifted up by the speeches of Martin Luther King or Lou Gehrig clearly illustrates how "we" can get caught up in something that is not something that any individual created, caused or willed. My concern is directed more to the average-every-day "Joe" as he goes through his life. Does he have to wait for the next wave to lift him up only to have it pass away leaving a void until the next magic moment occurs? The last chapter summarized, for me, what we face in this modern era. For me it is summed up with "it ain't what you do; it's how you do it." I look at my own life as it progresses and those around me who are fully involved in arenas that matter to them even though I would doubt they would even say it that way. They live what being-in-world points to and they are, for me, a living example of what it means to care. I don't have to have read Dante's *Inferno* or *Moby Dick* to appreciate not only what they are doing but how they do it, As I watch them I am inspired by how they take life on in their average everydayness. They are a shining example of what it means to be a human being.

Modern academic philosophers are often criticized for not having anything to say about ordinary life. The discipline thought of as one that addresses the big problems of life seems to have little to say of interest to anyone who actually lives a life. There's some truth to that, but this book is one that does have something to say about ordinary life and how to live one well. And it says it in a very accessible, compelling way. The authors provide a historical diagnosis of a critical cultural loss -- our loss of an immediate sense of what to do, of what matters, of the values to live by. Early in the book, they recite the story of a man, Wesley Autrey, who without hesitation risked his life to help a man who had fallen onto the subway tracks in New York. What's remarkable to them is how rare Autrey's act is, not so much because it was brave as because it was certain and immediate. It's not as if Autrey weighed the pros and cons and decided to act courageously -- he just did. As he says, "I just saw someone who needed help." His perception of the situation dictated his response. While there are trivial examples of such automatic responses to situations in everyday life, ones in which our mettle is tested are rare. Others were on the train platform and didn't do what Autrey did. And the

authors believe that such certainty of what to do, of what matters, is something we've lost. And we've lost it because of a centuries-long process of turning ourselves deaf to the call of situations -- the evolution of the individual self, with an autonomous, internal life has produced that deafness. We no longer listen outside ourselves but only within ourselves, for meaning and direction. And that internalized self is no longer capable of finding or creating the kind of values that sustain meaningful lives for us. They trace this development from a breakdown of Homeric polytheism, through Aeschylus, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Dante, Descartes, Kant, and, maybe most pointedly, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. Their analysis of *Moby Dick* may be the highlight of the book, finding in its characters and plot twists a kind of encyclopedia of the search for meaning in life. In the end, they settle into something a little surprising. We don't solve the problem of the self by curing the self. We solve it by looking outside the self, to mundane practices and our ability to be receptive to public moods and the call of ordinary meaning in such rituals as family meals, sports events, and the like -- the things that "shine" forth as meaningful in everyday life. Nothing transcendent, nothing requiring great leaps of enlightenment. In fact, it is the opposite -- we've tried so hard to develop individual enlightenment and autonomy of thought in our internal lives that we've neglected those ordinary practices and the swells of meaning in big public events, such as Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Lincoln Memorial speech. They also warn of a tendency of modern technology (or maybe better, a kind of "technologism" -- a technological world-view) that covers up those everyday practices and sources of meaning and substitutes for them a kind of marshaling of resources and reduction of the efforts of life to "ease". If anything, I'd like to have heard more about this. This is the argument of Heidegger's *The Question Concerning Technology*, and maybe it would be better to take the topic on to a reading of that book. Whether the problem the authors diagnose is one of "everyone" or only of a class of intellectually-aware post-moderns is debatable. I wouldn't dismiss its reach into "everyone." In fact, I question the perception I began with, that modern philosophy has little to do with ordinary life. Without speaking of the philosophers and other intellectuals behind the concepts, businessmen speak of "paradigm shifts", public policy experts line up on the side of Rawlsian liberalism, Friedmanesque free market theory, and so on. There's more going on than meets the eye.

At the 50,000 foot level Sartre is right in that the question we all need to ask is--why not suicide. Yet life isn't lived at the 50,000 foot level; it's lived on the ground, in the trenches, day-to-day, minute-to-minute. The philosophy of the cancer ward is to take it one day at a time and enjoy. We may not all be looking death in the face, but from the 50,000 foot level we actually are, for a life time

is only a flicker of a moment in the greater scheme of things. All Things Shining (ATS) is trying to help us focus on the here and now and find things that shine--the rituals, the celebrations, the skills, etc., which bring joy to our day-to-day lives. What's important about the ATS approach is that it avoids what I consider to be the error of existentialism, which is the belief that we can achieve meaning in life through rational effort alone. Rather, our reach for meaning has to start at the level of emotions, which are at the pre-rational--the symbolic, the ritualistic; the dramaturgical--for emotions serve as the foundation for our rationality. The focus of ATS is on that pre-rational. We can't retrieve the pre-rational beliefs of the Greeks--their gods, their rituals--but they can serve as a didactic that helps us look for relevant analogies in the present; analogies that are right in front of us, but we don't see because we don't know how to look. ATS has helped me to make more of life's little rituals--e.g. brewing a good cup of coffee, achieving a close and satisfying shave, watching an art or athletic performance--and attempt to extract more joy from the little celebrations of existence--e.g. holiday gift giving or achieving a small advance at work. In retrospect, I think ATS helps to delineate I am too much of a Stoic. The Stoic isn't the happy person in the concentration camp; rather, he is the joyless person at the birthday party, the wedding and the concentration camp. He is the guy, who volunteers to go to the front of the shower line. Stoicism may help me get through the hard times, but it leaves me joyless in the day-to-day. ATS has helped me to look more closely at the little rituals of the day-to-day--e.g. making coffee, shaving--and at life's little celebrations--e.g. Valentines day, a small advance in my work--and try to make the most of them. In retrospect, I think ATS helps to delineate I am too much of a Stoic. The Stoic isn't the happy person in the concentration camp; rather, he is the joyless person at the birthday party, the wedding and the concentration camp. He is the guy, who volunteers to go to the front of the shower line. Stoicism may help me get through the hard times, but it leaves me joyless in the day-to-day. ATS has helped me to look more closely at the little rituals of the day-to-day--e.g. making coffee, shaving--and at life's little celebrations--e.g. Valentines day, a small advance in my work--and try to make the most of them.

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