

that in some cases it is homophobia and misogyny that is causing the huge rise of adolescent girls taking puberty blocking hormones, cross-sex hormones and gender reassignment surgery.

What Stock's book does most usefully, I think, is foreground the suffering of the individual who questions their gender; she asks us to look at our society and our epistemology to see how we can respond more thoughtfully to these individuals. Thought needs to be embraced above action, seems to be the overriding message of her book.

Sarah Miell

The Limits of My Language: Meditations on depression

Eva Meijer, 2021. London: Pushkin Press.

Little did I know how an impulse purchase in Schiphol airport in early 2020 would become a source of solace and comfort as I mourned my father – I was returning home from his funeral – and dealt with lockdown after lockdown. Eva Meijer's *The Limits of My Language* is a wonderful literary exploration of the complex and often limited nature of language. Meijer draws on her own experiences of depression and those of others to explore the complex relationship between language and mental illness. She looks at how language shapes us, allowing and limiting us to fully capture the experience of depression and our understanding of the world.

Together we embarked on a journey, delving into the various aspects of language and philosophy. Many an existentialist make an appearance as she explores the richness and shortcomings of language to capture the nuances of the human experience. Nietzsche and Heidegger, who both make an appearance, underscore the boundaries of language in their work. Heidegger went so far as to say that we dwell in language, a depiction I find irresistible, as it is the only way we can understand ourselves and world. Without it, we fail to understand who we are.

Meijer compelled me to think how language impacts my perception of the world and my interactions with others. She showed how it can fall short as a tool to describe our inner experiences, often resulting in feelings of misunderstanding and isolation. She made me look beyond words to other forms of expression, such as art, music and body language. She also recognised that these experiences are shaped by a complex web of social and cultural factors, and that language itself is intertwined in this intricate web:

You are rooted in a social context that you take for granted—even when it involves a lot of friction. You chat to a colleague, make jokes with your neighbour... All these interactions form a layer around you that shields you from loneliness, and by that I don't

mean feeling alone, but the more fundamental existential awareness that we are really alone.

(pp44-45)

She acknowledges that there are no easy answers to the challenges posed by mental illness. Meijer delves into ways in which depression can be both a solitary and a shared experience. On one hand, depression isolates, creating barriers that hinder our connection with others and the world. On the other hand, depression can be seen as a collective and universal experience shared by many people. She observes that while each person's encounter with depression is unique, the underlying emotions and struggles are often similar. I met her, and myself, in her depression encounters as they somewhat echoed my own journey through depression:

...thoughts that thrust themselves into a nest of other thoughts and ruthlessly push out their healthy foster-brothers and sisters (like baby cuckoos), an ever-present shadow (even in the light), | a confirmation, a truth, an illusion, heavy sand where the shore turns to sea...greyness that sucks up every colour, until all that's left is the memory of colour.

(p7)

Meijer also reflects on the ways in which language can both enable and limit our understanding of depression. She recognises the growing awareness of the importance of talking openly about mental illness and emphasises that language is a powerful tool to break down stigma and foster belonging. Meijer acknowledges that there are limitations to what language can convey, and that some aspects of the experience of depression are simply indefinable and elusive to verbal communication.

The book has a lyrical quality but I was disappointed when I read the English translation as the language was simpler and lost some of its Dutch poetic essence. It was almost painful to read the book and it longer captured me as I witnessed the fading of its soul. The carefully chosen words in Dutch, the visual language that delicately and almost dreamily communicated the writer's experiences, and the pathos of her voice seemed to get lost in translation. It serves as a living example of the limits of language. Hence, I would recommend that those who can read the book in Dutch, or if that is not possible, in German (although I have not personally tested the latter) as its translation may better convey its original spirit. I had a similar experience during my studies a decade ago when I opted to read Heidegger's *Being and Time* in Dutch rather than in English as required by the course. In English, the text failed to resonate, in fact was longwinded, dense and sometimes incomprehensible. However, in Dutch (a language

closely related to German), his words, and more importantly their meaning, came to life.

Meijer highlights how easy it can be to succumb to self-blame and self-criticism when struggling with mental illness, but she emphasises the importance of recognising that depression is not your fault. She talks a lot in the book about knowing herself, recognising the looming shadow of depression, and the significance of self-care and self-compassion in these moments. She emphasises the importance of finding ways to care for oneself, whether through therapy, medication or other forms of support. Running, going outside, bracketing her thoughts and staying on the journey are essential aspects of her self-care. She also acknowledges that the process is non-linear and that certain days may be simply wasted:

Sometimes it's twilight, then I'm under a shadow or a soft black layer, as if a wash of watercolour has been painted across me and everything else. I'm not standing in the light then, nor in the darkness; I can see both. I know it could be better than this, but something's wrong and I have to stay alert. I also know it could be far worse: I can still think, make plans, move.

(pp55-56)

On a personal level, I loved the book. The moving and lyrical language, and the exploration of the unexpressed brought me solace during difficult months. As a psychotherapist, I consider it a valuable resource that explores the power and limitations of communication. Its intimate portrait of depression and the difficulties faced by those who live it benefits my work with depressed clients. This may help them feel heard and understood, and perhaps reduce their sense of isolation. I also found it useful for clients who are looking to deepen their understanding of depression. Despite its profound insights, the book is accessible and not intellectually demanding. It is concise at one-hundred and twenty pages and is far from a waste of time.

Ondine Smulders

Humanly Possible: Seven hundred years of humanist freethinking, enquiry and hope

Sarah Bakewell, 2023. UK: Penguin Random House.

I chose to review this book partly because I have enjoyed Sarah Bakewell's earlier books but also because I could not say for sure what humanism is, and since we say existential therapy fits into humanist philosophy it seemed time to find out.

I have asked friends what they think it is and got responses about it being a nebulous concept, too idealistic or simply 'no idea'. A therapist