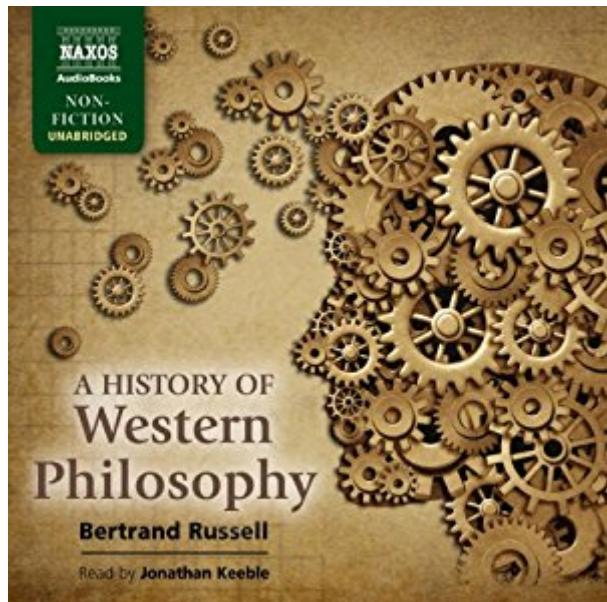


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A History Of Western Philosophy



Synopsis

Bertrand Russell's *A History of Western Philosophy* serves as the perfect introduction to its subject; it remains unchallenged as the greatest account of the history of Western thought. Charting philosophy's course from the pre-Socratics up to the early twentieth century, Russell relates each philosopher and school to their respective historical and cultural contexts, providing erudite commentary throughout his invaluable survey. This engaging and comprehensive work has done much to educate and inform generations of general readers; it is written in accessible and elegantly crafted prose and allows for an easy grasp of complex ideas.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Russell's "History of Western Philosophy" is not the best introduction to western philosophy that I have read. That place goes to Antony Flew's "Introduction to Western Philosophy." But for many readers, Russell's is still the better book. Flew's book is purely about philosophy. Russell, on the other hand, strives to place thought in its social context, and he is so successful that the book doubles as an outline history of the western world, and a very interesting one. Also, Russell's deep understanding of the relationship between philosophy and science adds interest. Finally, Russell's clear explanations of difficult concepts should make those concepts clear even to the novice or near-novice; Flew's book, although it assumes no knowledge of philosophy, is more technical, and so is not suitable for all novices. Despite this book's well-deserved status as a classic work, it has some major flaws that a reader should keep in mind, all stemming from Russell's intolerance of viewpoints different from his own. Russell, like other logical positivists, saw no place for

metaphysics in philosophy. In his "History of Western Philosophy," he makes no effort to curb that bias, resulting in what might be considered unfair treatments of all thinkers who did not stick purely to science. Also, Russell has no tolerance for systems of thought that do not conform to his preferences for democracy, atheism, pacifism, and social liberalism. So Plato is described as just another proponent of totalitarianism, Rousseau is portrayed as a crackpot and Nietzsche is depicted as a warmonger, but the much less significant thinkers John Dewey and William James get personal kudos for being nice progressive guys full of human kindness.

Bertrand Russell's "History of Western Philosophy," quite simply, is the best all-around history I've seen. Will Durant's is accessible but more informative about its subjects lives than their thoughts. Copleston's history is much more informative but much too long (11 vol.) for any but the most serious student. Antony Flew's, for all of its strengths, presumes much more technical knowledge than the average lay reader will have. Russell's book, then, seems the best all around intro - it is long enough but not too long, detailed enough but not overly technical, and interesting enough while remaining all the while informative. And unlike all of the others, Russell writes with the impeccable clarity we expect from him, and admirable enthusiasm. Russell's layout is thus: he sets the stage for each section (ancient, scholastic, enlightenment, romantic, modern) by giving a brief historical chapter. Once done, he sets to work on a 10-20 page walk through of each prominent philosopher therein. While he is quite objective throughout (with the occasional biting remark for humor), he generally finishes each 'walk through' with a critique from his perspective of the philosopher in question. These are useful for both the lay person (who has fodder for thought) and the more experienced reader (who gets both the philosopher's and Russell's view). Before I finish my review of this remarkably clear and interesting book, I must present a quote from the book that I feel is endemic of Russell and how he approaches all the multifarious philosophers that fill these pages.

Perhaps we can say that this book represents the best in philosophy -- and lo -- the worst in philosophy. Widely regarded as one of the century's most eminent and controversial thinkers it is not unusual that this book should attract a great deal of attention. Russell shows that he is clearly a man of his times, and while he treats some philosophers with too much superficiality, this book remains a solid exposition of western philosophy. The writing here is superb, it is both accessible and insightful, and he always keeps the storyline moving forward in a kind of spirited hop, while trying to throw in some humor along the way. With great confidence in his own intellectual devices, he never hesitates to follow calm philosophic discussions with sharp polemical swipes. And why

not? This is what gives the book its spice. While the main focus of this book is on western philosophy, the book tries to push into the border disciplines of history, science and mathematics. The reader gets to enjoy a nice introduction into the problem of 2 squared, the mathematics of Tycho Brahe, and the paradox of sets. Russell shows no intention of giving short shrift to mathematics and science. In fact, his chapter on the rise of science in the 17th century is the finest in the book. So what does our Superstar think of philosophy? What makes his opinions so popular to some, but not to others? To avoid any misunderstanding let us see exactly what Russell has to say about philosophy. He says "Philosophy...is something intermediate between between theology and science. It consists of speculations on matters as to which definite knowledge has been unascertainable; but like science, it appeals to human reason.

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