



How We Are and How We Got Here

A Practical History of Western Philosophy

Douglas Giles

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Real Clear Philosophy

Contents

PREFACE FOR INSTRUCTORS	1
ABOUT PHILOSOPHY	4
1. PLATO	8
2. ARISTOTLE	24
3. THE NOT-SO-DARK AGES	40
Plotinus	40
Augustine	44
The Transition from Antiquity to the Medieval Era	50
The Islamic Renaissance	52
William—The Forerunner of Modern Philosophy	57
4. THE “SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION”	62
Montaigne—“What Do I Know?”	63
Francis Bacon—The Foundations of Science	64
René Descartes—The Methodical Scientist	70
5. THE RISE OF MODERN EPISTEMOLOGY	84
Thomas Hobbes’s Materialist Epistemology	84
John Locke’s Epistemology	90
6. THE RISE OF MODERN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY	97
Hobbes’s Social Bargain	98
Locke’s Theory of the Divine Right to Change Kings	105
Radical Political Critique	112
7. QUESTIONING EPISTEMOLOGY’S ASSUMPTIONS	121
George Berkeley—Matter Doesn’t Matter	121
David Hume—The End of Philosophy?	131
8. IMMANUEL KANT’S REVOLUTION	145
9. GERMAN IDEALISM	162
Going Beyond Kant	162
G.W.F. Hegel and His Grand System	169
10. POLITICAL PHILOSOPHIES OF SOCIAL REFORM	179
British Reform Movement	179
Karl Marx—the Misinterpreted Diagnostician	185
11. THE EXPLOSION OF INDIVIDUALISM	200
Søren Kierkegaard	201
Friedrich Nietzsche	211
Transcendentalism	218
12. AMERICAN PROGRESSIVISM AND PRAGMATISM	220
American Progressive Reform Movements	220
Charles Sanders Peirce—The Pragmatic Scientist	225
William James—Pragmatic Beliefs	230

Jane Addams—People-centered Pragmatism	235
John Dewey’s Instrumentalism	238
The Influence of Pragmatism	241
13. PHILOSOPHY’S GREAT DIVIDE— POSITIVISM VERSUS PROCESS	243
Positivism—The Birth of Analytic Philosophy	243
Henri Bergson Explains Process versus Positivism	250
Alfred North Whitehead’s Natural Theology	257
Ludwig Wittgenstein—From Positivism to Process	261
Two Different Approaches to the World	268
14. PHENOMENOLOGY AND EXISTENTIALISM	269
Edmund Husserl’s Phenomenology	269
Max Scheler’s Philosophy of Life	276
Edith Stein’s Phenomenology	281
Martin Heidegger—Being and Time	284
Karl Jaspers’s Existentialism	289
Jean-Paul Sartre’s Existentialism	292
Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology	293
15. CONTINENTAL SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY	295
Wilhelm Dilthey—Lived Experience	296
W.E.B. Du Bois—Accepting Paradox	298
José Ortega y Gasset’s Philosophy of Life	299
Neo-Marxism—Why Hasn’t Capitalism Failed?	303
Hannah Arendt—Against Totalitarianism	307
Isaiah Berlin’s Political Philosophy	310
Jürgen Habermas—Communication and Culture	312
Axel Honneth’s Recognition Theory	315
Christine Korsgaard—Self-Constitution	319
16. ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY	321
Analytic Philosophy of Language	321
Analytic Political Philosophy	325
Analytic Epistemology	330
Analytic Philosophy of Mind	333
17. TEARING DOWN PHILOSOPHY—POSTMODERNISM	336
The Precursors of Postmodernism	337
The Hazy Dawn of Postmodernism	338
Michel Foucault—Disciplinary Society	340
Jacques Derrida—Deconstruction	343
Jean Baudrillard—Signs and Simulacra	345
Jean-François Lyotard—Against Metanarratives	349
18. RETHINKING PHILOSOPHY— FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY	353
The First Wave—Human Rights	354
The Second Wave—Liberation	355
The Third Wave—Intersectional Feminism	362
Gender and the Feminist Critique of Science	367
Feminist Political Philosophy	371
19. PHILOSOPHY OF RACE	375
The Idea of Race	376

Early 1900s Philosophy of Race	378
The Lived Experience of Blackness	381
Critiques of Structural Racism	388
The Future of Race	394
20. TOWARD PHILOSOPHY'S FUTURE	396
Philosophy of Science	396
Globalization	401
Technology	403
Postcolonial Theory	405
Nonheteronormative Philosophy	410
A Concluding Unscientific Postscript	412
CHRONOLOGY	414
REFERENCES	421

PREFACE FOR INSTRUCTORS

This book helps students of any age or background learn about the story of philosophy in the Western world. I wrote it to fill the prodigious gap between books that oversimplify philosophy and complex works that are inaccessible to nonprofessionals (and many professionals!). I also want to give instructors of philosophy a textbook option that is affordable and accessible for students and includes important philosophers who are left out of the standard textbooks.

How We Are and How We Got Here is a distillation of what my decades of teaching has taught me about how students best learn about philosophy and why it matters. I kept several premises in mind throughout the book, the most important being that everyone can understand philosophy and be a philosopher if given the resources to do so.

How This Book Differs from Standard Textbooks

In writing this book for use in university courses, I wanted to avoid two pitfalls of standard textbooks on philosophy. One is the ridiculous high cost of textbooks that publishing corporations expect students to pay. Second is that standard textbooks don't adequately give students the resources they need to connect meaningfully with philosophy. These two pitfalls are partially connected.

The overuse of primary texts is confusing to students. Some instructors feel that philosophy is best taught through source material. I respect their choice, but I have seen too many students enter my courses who dropped out of a previous Introduction to Philosophy section in which the instructor threw complex source texts at them and expected them to sink or swim. These students sank and learned little to nothing. These students aren't stupid, and they aren't lazy; they weren't given the tools to succeed.

Therefore, this book is not a "reader." It is a book that explains the philosophers' ideas. That is its role—as a guide. I think that the role of a philosophy textbook is to be a secondary resource that helps instructors explain the philosophers' ideas, so this book references the primary texts without reproducing them. This saves page space for explanation and discussion, while keeping costs down for the students paying for the book. It also gives instructors more freedom to add whatever primary texts they deem fitting. Primary source texts are widely available in the public domain, and I encourage instructors to share them with students as I do in my courses.

Another key difference in this book is its emphasis on recent philosophy. Quite a few standard textbooks focus predominantly on ancient and early modern philosophy, giving students the impression that philosophy was a pursuit of the past. Some “readers” textbooks have recently added to their disjoint approach a few essays more recently written, but not in a coherent way that shows the current directions in philosophy. It is important to show that philosophy is an ongoing conversation that is continuing to engage with current social issues and break new ground.

This book includes philosophy’s current engagement with social changes and real-life concerns and that includes covering current movements in social philosophy, feminist philosophy, and philosophy of race, among other current issues in philosophy. *How We Are and How We Got Here* includes more philosophers who are female, people of color, and nonheteronormative than probably any other textbook, and not as mere box-checking but acknowledging these philosophers’ important roles in philosophy’s effects on society.

What This Book Covers and Why

An important lesson I have learned from teaching philosophy is the importance of learning philosophy chronologically. Students benefit from learning how philosophy has developed by seeing how philosophers interacted with historical changes, and students gain understanding by appreciating how philosophers build on the ideas of their predecessors.

A historical, contextual approach to philosophy avoids the disconnected and fragmented view offered by topically arranged textbooks. This book shows how throughout history, philosophy connects with real life and our everyday experiences. It looks at philosophy not as an arcane collection of disconnected questions but as an ongoing dialogue in response to real-world problems.

Any book on the history of philosophy invites debate over who and what are left undiscussed. What I have tried to do is include the philosophers and ideas most influential to us today. I agonized over many dozens of decisions whether to go into more detail about particular philosophers and ideas. Obviously, I am making a set of value judgments in deciding what ideas are, and are not, significant, and every judgment that I have made is open for discussion. Nevertheless, I think it important to present philosophy to students as something pertinent to their lives and not merely as academic pedantry, so that principle guided my decisions.

This book is targeted to beginning to intermediate students in philosophy. Therefore, it does not delve into many deep details that are worthy of discussion because an analysis of them would not directly

benefit the target audience of this book. The book's content is designed to help readers understand the basic content of the philosophers' ideas without confusing or intimidating them with opaque complexities. I have kept in mind the many, many questions that my students have asked over the years about philosophy because those conversations help reveal the issues most relevant to discuss in this book. A very important aim is that this book never talks down to students but includes them in philosophy's long conversation.

Of course, this book is designed to fulfill most schools' general distribution requirements. That is why its subject matter is Western philosophy. Philosophy departments need to satisfy the requirements handed down to them by their states and institutions, and, regrettably, non-Western philosophy is not part of those distribution requirements. There is a widespread ethnocentrism in U.S. education that leaves very little room for non-Western knowledge. A recent trend in some standard textbooks is to include a few paragraphs about ancient Chinese and Indian philosophers, but these inclusions serve more as sidebar curiosities. These textbooks give students the false impression that philosophy in China and India stopped more than 2,000 years ago, and I think this does more harm than good. Those two cultures, among others, deserve adequate attention and background in a book much larger than this one.

Also in the service of schools' general distribution requirements, this book does not cover logic or critical thinking. Most schools cover that material in specific critical thinking or reasoning courses. This book also does not include ethics because most schools teach stand-alone courses on ethics. Leaving out logic and ethical theory allows this book, and courses that adopt it, to spend more of the limited course time on the rest of philosophy.

I very much welcome feedback from instructors on ideas to improve this book. Like philosophy itself, this book is an ongoing process always seeking to be better in addressing the problems of the real world.

Best Regards,
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