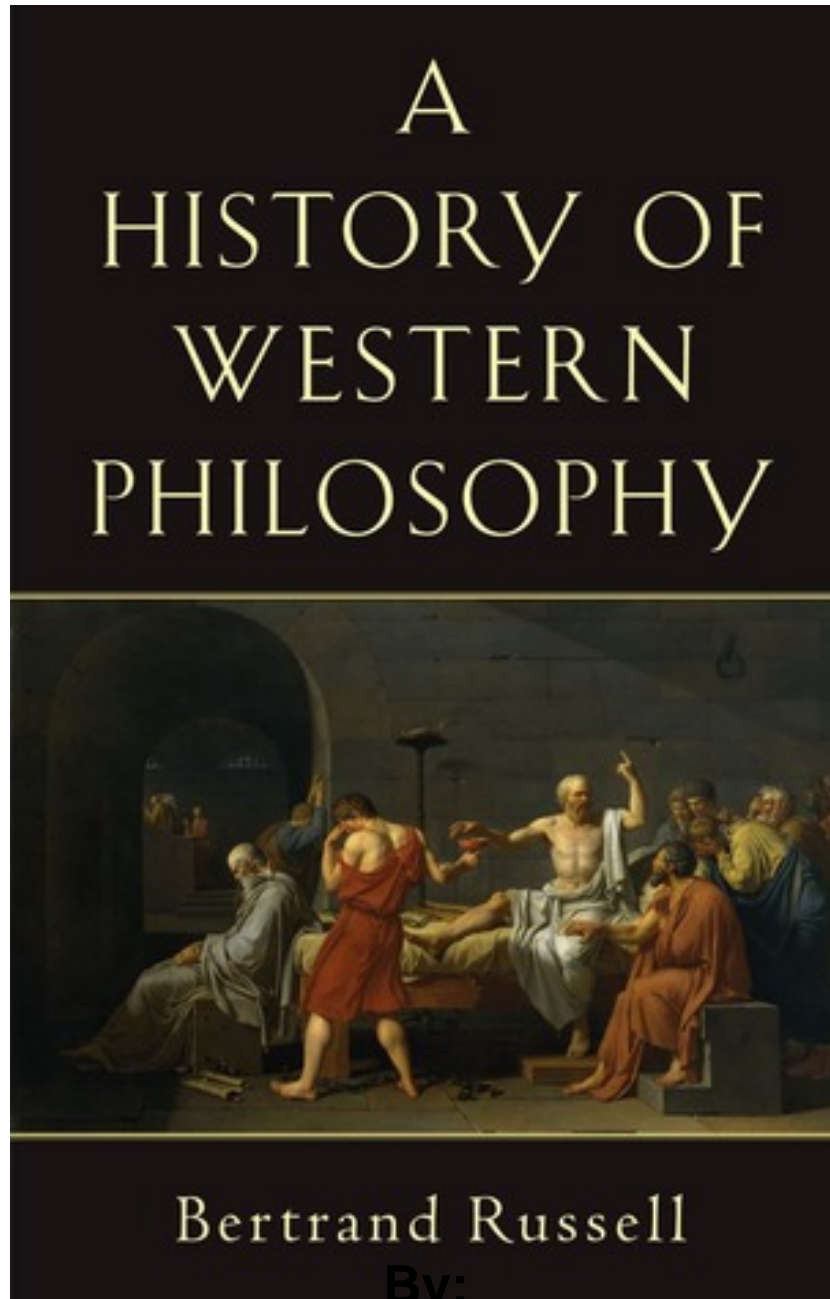


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What people Say:

Riku Sayuj

Russell is consistently opinionated throughout his presentation and it might confuse some of the readers that he is so casual in writing off some of the major philosophers and their key ideas. This is because the book is not a mere history of philosophy, a mere account of ideas, by any stretch. Instead it is a critical survey, a long catalogue of what Russell agrees and disagrees with among all the major doctrines. The format followed is

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In fact, I think that three strands of vexation can be discerned:

1. Leading to orthodoxy in religion
2. Leading to rigidity in logic
3. Leading to Totalitarian fantasies

Any idea which Russell felt was tending towards these were roundly attacked and put in place. Must have felt like a humanitarian act, writing this book! After all,

If you were to attempt a history of philosophy, you can write a history without imposing on the reader what your own opinions are. Or you can write a history just to let the reader know exactly what you (as a thinker of some standing yourself, you might add!) think of each philosopher. Or you can write a history and try to justify why you prefer some, even one, more than the others.

Russell has opted to for a mix of the last two options " and he prefers himself over all others, that's all!

As the book progresses it becomes more and more clear that it is a summary of Russell's views, and not of the philosophers being discussed. This means that most of them gets short shrift. And as we approach modern times it is amusing to see how Russell is almost impatient for the history to quickly reach and culminate in his own position of Logical Positivism, which he clearly thinks is the best approach to philosophy and in the light of which he judges everyone else. This allows him to

narrate the entire historical progress in a patronizing and all-knowing tone that might be jarring to a reader who is not willing to take the same attitude towards Russell's own naivete!

Manny

There's a throwaway remark in this book which has haunted me ever since I read it some time in the mid-70s. Russell is talking about Socrates, and he wonders if Socrates actually existed. Maybe Plato made him up.

"I don't think many people would have been able to make up Socrates," muses Russell. "But Plato could have done it."

It's hard not to continue this line of reasoning. If Socrates turns out to be fictional, who else is? And which fictional characters of today will later be accepted as hist

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It's hard not to continue this line of reasoning. If Socrates turns out to be fictional, who else is? And which fictional characters of today will later be accepted as historical persons? The more you think about it, the more you start feeling that the world really is a Philip K. Dick novel.

Mark Lawrence

I stole this off my father's shelves many years ago. The indications on the inside cover was that he read it in Finland in 1959 - I think he once missed a train there and the next one wasn't for a week.

It's true that this is in many respects a heavy, dry, and testing read. On the other hand it's full of interesting anecdotes about the philosophers themselves, from the earliest of ancient Greeks to Russell's contemporaries in the 20th century. And Russell, a mathematician of the highest order as

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It's true that this is in many respects a heavy, dry, and testing read. On the other hand it's full of interesting anecdotes about the philosophers themselves, from the earliest of ancient Greeks to Russell's contemporaries in the 20th century. And Russell, a mathematician of the highest order as well as a starred philosopher is a clear and concise writer, careful to present each person's work in the context of its time, and showing how to some extent such philosophy shaped and refined the period it came from. Moreover the author's wit shows through on most pages and he has a definite way with words.

Just as we have authors today writing to make the most esoteric physics accessible to the layman through intelligent precis and analogy, Russell appears to have been a populist of his time. This is very definitely an introduction, a guide, a setting of the development of philosophy through a string of individuals and schools, rather than a thorough examination of any particular one of them. It is likely one of the most accessible of serious works on philosophy, but given the era that produced it (1940s) and the elevation of its author, it will place demands on the reader.

It ends (if I remember correctly) with a summary of his own work in Principia Mathematica and a fascinating account of how Godel undermined Russell's masterwork twenty years later.

Very well worth reading.

Trevor

This is a remarkable book. Over the years I have found various reasons to look into it now and again, but have never read the whole thing. Mostly I've read the bits about particular

philosophers: Heraclitus, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Marx for example. I hadn't realised that dipping in this way was missing much of the point of the book.

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This is not just a history of Western Philosophy, but also a bit of a 'how do all of the main schools of Western Philosophy fit into their culture and times'. So, much time is spent giving thumb-nail sketches of the history of certain periods in a way that will help the student of philosophy understand where philosophers were coming from when they said such bizarre things as: nothing changes, everything changes, everything is fire, everything is water, matter does not exist, mind does not exist, and so on.

He makes some truly fascinating points in this book – not least that there is no philosophy that is wholly logically consistent and that sometimes the danger is when a philosopher seeks to remain logically consistent rather than acknowledge the horrendous conclusions that the logical consistency of his ideas forces him toward. I use the male pronoun not simply because Russell also uses it throughout, but because all of the philosophers discussed sport a Y-chromosome.

The book is divided into three parts: Ancient Philosophy, Catholic Philosophy and Modern Philosophy. It was written during the Second World War and I think this shows in part, particularly when Russell is discussing the merits of some philosophers – not least Nietzsche and Marx. I had thought that I would find the middle section on Catholics the least interesting – I believe that we moderns feel we have much more in common with Ancients than we do with the Catholic scholastics of the dark and middle ages – but Russell is very kind to these philosophers, although in the main I found them to be little more than pedants adding Christian footnotes to Plato and Aristotle. Perhaps, in another life, I will have time to read one or two of them and see if my attitude changes.

This is not a book that requires either an extensive knowledge of philosophy, nor an extensive knowledge of history to be understood. Russell is a remarkably clear writer (something that for a philosopher really is worth commenting on and something that deserves the highest praise). He also is occasionally quite amusing. Now, I know that people who follow either Marx, Kant, Hegel, Dewey, Nietzsche or even Aristotle might find quite a few things to say in disagreement with Mr Russell, but that in no way takes away from the value of this book. I've listened to a Teaching Company 'Great Ideas In Philosophy' course which covered all of the philosophers discussed here, and I think Russell does at least as good a job as was done there. Invaluable is a word that is grossly overused on this site – particularly by me – but I do think this book gives an invaluable helicopter

view of the history of Western Philosophy that is both accessible and often profound.

I once received my lowest mark in my degree for saying pretty much what Russell says here about his mate Dewey - I am rather proud of the fact that I've only discovered our shared view now - twenty years later. I've always found Instrumentalism (otherwise known as Pragmatism) a thoroughly unsatisfactory philosophical standpoint, despite both James and Dewey seeming to be nice enough people in themselves. My main problem with the total rejection of the possibility of any sense that there might be 'truth' (which Russell, as might be expected, confines to logical statements) has always had a bit of a smell about it. When I said this in a class paper at Uni I was nearly lynched by both the lecturer (a declared Instrumentalist) and the other students (who knew better than I which side their bread was buttered). I think Russell's arguments in this section are similar to the ones I tried to make, but are made in a way that is infinitely clearer than I was capable of at the time - a time when I was keen to seem very 'philosophic' ie, totally unclear. Essentially, I've always thought that to move away from discussing the 'truth' of statements and to instead consider their 'efficacy' is a slippery slope and one that can all too easily bring us to splash down into logical and moral difficulties.

His discussion of Bergson's philosophy was enough to ensure I will never read anything by Bergson. I find irrationalism dull and, what is even worse, mind-numbingly 'poetic' in the very worst sense of that word. Sometimes one needs to be obscure because what you are trying to say does not allow you to be immediately clear. However, as Russell displays so beautifully in this book, that is rarely really necessary and the onus is on the writer to make it clear why being turgid or obscure to the point of impenetrability is in either the interests of the reader or the writer.

What is best about this book is that it has inspired me to read some more Plato (I started his complete dialogues some time ago, but things got in the way.) Russell's discussion of Socrates and his relationship to Plato is worth reading the book on its own. Plato is a fascinating character, not least because it seems a case can be made that he became increasingly less convinced of his theory of forms as his dialogues went on. Given that this is the core of his system, this would seem somewhat of a problem.

Roy Lotz

I enjoyed this a bit too much.

is exactly my kind of book, and so this review will be biased.

This, however, illustrates my first point. One's opinion of this work will largely depend on one's opinion of Russell. This is because he frequently injects his views, ideas, and opinions

into the text. I happen to love the guy; I'm sure reactions will differ.

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In this history, Russell does not entirely succeed in his stated goal. What he was trying to do was to firmly situate major thinkers in their historical and cultural context, and then explore the ways that history both shapes and is shaped by these thinkers. This is more successful in the first two thirds, but drops off rather steeply in the section on modern philosophy. Following this plan, the book is divided into chapters on history and chapters on philosophers.

Russell is an excellent writer. Even his fiercest critics grant him this merit. He has a knack for presenting abstract ideas with penetrating clarity. On top of this, he has a delightfully dry sense of humor, which he employs to great effect in breaking up turgid analysis. In general, Russell is at his strongest when presenting the philosophy itself; he is at his weakest when writing history. His ability to generalize is the cause of both qualities.

As I mentioned above, Russell frequently injects his own views into the book. It should be noted, though, that he is crystal-clear when he is doing so. The reader is never confused as to whether it is Russell's idea or that of the philosopher under discussion. The bulk of these additions are Russell's opinions on philosophical problems and the success of their attempted solutions. Because Russell himself is one of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century, these discussions are some of the most fascinating parts of the work. I would go so far to say "and I am in no position to say this" that no other book can give the student a greater insight into Russell's thinking. He takes the opportunity to address nearly every aspect of philosophy: ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, political philosophy, etc.