



*Philosophy
and
philosophers*

AN INTRODUCTION TO
WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

John Shand

**Also available as a printed book
see title verso for ISBN details**

*Philosophy
and
philosophers*



*Philosophy
and
philosophers*

An introduction to
Western philosophy

John Shand



© John Shand 1993

This book is copyright under the Berne Convention.
No reproduction without permission.
All rights reserved.

First published in 1993 by UCL Press

UCL Press Limited
University College London
Gower Street
London WC1E 6BT

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003.

The name of University College London (UCL) is a registered
trade mark used by UCL Press with the consent of the owner.

ISBN 0-203-49899-2 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-80723-5 (Adobe eReader Format)

ISBN:
1-85728-074-1 HB

Published by arrangement with Penguin Books Limited.

The moral rights of the author have been asserted.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

PREFACE

Several people have helped me write this book.

I should especially like to thank my wife Judith for her unflagging and invaluable encouragement, as well as her practical help; she checked the whole manuscript and proofs and also pointed out anything ambiguous or unclear; without her help this book would not have been completed.

I should like to acknowledge the help of the following people, each of whom read and commented on some part of the manuscript: David Bell, Michael Clark, David E.Cooper, Oswald Hanfling, Desmond P. Henry, David Lamb, Harry Lesser, Kathryn Plant, Robert Wilkinson. Thanks must also go to Ted Honderich and Jonathan Riley. In a general way I should like to thank all my past Open University students, whose actual and hypothetical opinions as to what is comprehensible I constantly bore in mind while writing the book. Invaluable has been the availability of the facilities of the University of Manchester: the Philosophy Department library and especially the John Rylands University Library of Manchester. Any remaining deficiencies in this book are of course entirely my responsibility.

I have not given precise references for quotations in the book, thinking them unnecessary and inappropriate in a work of this kind. However, I direct the reader's attention to the extensive annotated bibliography. The very few short direct quotations used are therefore left without precise references, although I sometimes cite the work from which the quote comes, and in all cases it should be obvious which philosopher is being quoted.

JOHN SHAND

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this book is to give an introduction to Western philosophy through its past, both distant and more recent, and to serve as a useful work for more advanced students of philosophy. The subject of philosophy is presented in this book by studying the thought of major philosophers and by concentrating on what are generally regarded as the central areas of philosophy: the nature of philosophy itself, the theory of knowledge (epistemology) and the essential nature of reality (metaphysics). It is hoped that this work will satisfy the curiosity of those who want to understand what philosophy is and will provide a key to further study of philosophy and philosophers. To aid the reader in further study an extensive annotated bibliography is included, which serves as a guide primarily to works by and about the philosophers considered in this book, although it also includes reference to more general works in philosophy.

The various chapters and sections within the book can be usefully read in isolation, since they are relatively autonomous, although there is an additional cumulative beneficial effect that results from reading right through the book in order.

It is impossible to deal with every controversy over interpretation. However, every attempt has been made to be clear and accurate. The general approach to each philosopher considered is to present an account which tries to make their views hang together convincingly, rather than subject them to intense critical dissection. There are, however, some critical observations which naturally arise from exposition.

It is difficult to give an account of the defining features of philosophy. The reason for the difficulty in answering the question of what philosophy is paradoxically provides an answer of sorts. An essential part of philosophy is the extent to which it reassesses its own nature. Philosophy tends to ask extremely broad and fundamental questions, and it raises problems which are not normally considered problems at all in most other areas of human inquiry. A feature which helps us to understand the nature of philosophy, and is one of the chief attractions of the subject, is its freedom of thought: in philosophy no question is, on the face of it, unaskable.

Philosophy does not have to be especially defensive or coy about its

nature or existence. It is sometimes said that the subject matter of philosophy is far removed from anything that could have practical importance in life. Even if this were true it would not follow that philosophy is not worth bothering with, for it might well be intrinsically interesting. In any case, philosophy does examine ideas in ethics and politics that have immediate practical consequences. Moreover, one of the reasons why philosophy is important is that more than any other subject it freely examines presuppositions and assumptions that people have that might otherwise go unquestioned; and many of these very basic beliefs, which people may take for granted, lead to, and underpin, other beliefs which have immediate practical consequences in that they determine what people believe and how they act. Whenever and wherever we live we absorb a world-view which can be so familiar that it can, through going unnoticed, go unexamined. So long as people are not dogmatically locked into, or wedded to, a fixed system of ideas and beliefs there will always be philosophy. Philosophy is not a luxury, indeed it becomes a necessity just as soon as people are able and willing to think freely about their beliefs. The terrible consequences that have followed from dogmatically held beliefs throughout human history bear sufficient testimony to the need to philosophize. Anyone who open-mindedly and critically examines, rather than simply accepts, fundamental ideas, has started doing philosophy. Philosophy cuts very deeply into our beliefs concerning the world and our place in it.

It is characteristic of philosophy that it goes back to where most other subjects begin and then probes still further back in its inquiries. Philosophy discusses enduring problems arising from life and thought. It is one of the attractions of philosophy that it connects thinkers of otherwise different historical ages and finds in them the same fundamental problems.

Reference to the historical and intellectual context in which a philosophical position arose may help us to understand what is meant by that position. However, it is important not to confuse the truth of philosophical positions and the soundness of the arguments presented for them with either their causal, psychological, historical origin or the extent of their causal, psychological, historical influence. Philosophy involves expounding existing ideas, creating new imaginative ideas, and critically assessing the soundness of arguments put forward in support of views claimed to be true. Neither the causal origin of a claim or argument, nor its causal influence on human affairs, has any relevance in assessing the truth of a claim or the soundness of the argument presented for it. One can of course trace origins and influences as well, but that is not the same as, and not a substitute for, assessing the validity of arguments and the truth of beliefs. A given philosophy could have an interesting origin or be very influential, but may still be bad philosophy for all that.

The nature of metaphysics can be characterized as the attempt by reason and argument alone to understand the essential structure of the world on the presupposition that there must be some features that all possible realities must have in common, however else they may differ. The metaphysician claims to be able to determine some general necessary truths about the nature of reality by reason alone independently of observation and the evidence of experience. Epistemology is concerned with what knowledge is, what conditions have to be satisfied for knowledge, what counts as good evidence and justification, and what in that case are the kinds of things we can know. Both metaphysics and epistemology raise questions which cannot be answered by empirical scientific investigation because any such investigation will have metaphysical and epistemological assumptions and presuppositions underpinning it, and so any answers derived from science would beg the questions raised. For example science makes assumptions about the reliability of empirical evidence, the nature of empirical theories, and what conditions have to be satisfied in general for it to be rational to believe one theory rather than another.

References in this book to ethics and politics will be few, although some mention of ethics is unavoidable because it is sometimes inextricably connected to a philosopher's concern with knowledge and the general structure of existence.

Those who are interested and willing to follow the path of philosophical inquiry are embarked on perhaps the greatest adventure of ideas of all. Philosophy is an important part of what Bertrand Russell called "all the noontday brightness of human genius", destined though it may be to ultimate annihilation; it is by such activity that for the time being human beings dignify themselves in the face of a universe that may seem at best indifferent to human concerns.

CHRONOLOGY OF PHILOSOPHERS

This lists the main philosophers considered in this book, apart from those in Chapter Twelve, "Recent philosophy". Sometimes, with figures from the more distant past, the dates are uncertain.

	BC		AD
Thales	(c.624–c.546)	Augustine	(354–430)
Anaximander	(c.610–c.546)	Aquinas	(1225–74)
Anaximenes	(c.585–c.528)	Ockham	(c.1285–1349)
Pythagoras	(c.571–c.497)	Descartes	(1596–1650)
Xenophanes	(fl.540)	Spinoza	(1632–77)
Heraclitus	(fl.504)	Locke	(1632–1704)
Parmenides	(fl.501–492)	Leibniz	(1646–1716)
Zeno	(fl.464)	Berkeley	(1685–1753)
Anaxagoras	(c.500–428)	Hume	(1711–76)
Empedocles	(c.484–c.424)	Kant	(1724–1804)
Socrates	(470–399)	Hegel	(1770–1831)
Democritus	(c.460–c.371)	Nietzsche	(1844–1900)
Leucippus	(fl.450–420)	Husserl	(1859–1938)
Melissus	(fl.441)	Russell	(1872–1970)
Plato	(427–347)	Wittgenstein	(1889–1951)
Aristotle	(384–322)	Popper	(1902–)
		Sartre	(1905–80)
		Ayer	(1910–89)



*Philosophy
and
philosophers*