



A History of Philosophy, Vol. 1: Greece and Rome, From the Pre-Socratics to Plotinus

Frederick Charles Copleston

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Conceived originally as a serious presentation of the development of philosophy for Catholic seminary students, Frederick Copleston's nine-volume *A History Of Philosophy* has journeyed far beyond the modest purpose of its author to universal acclaim as the best history of philosophy in English.

Copleston, an Oxford Jesuit of immense erudition who once tangled with A. J. Ayer in a fabled debate about the existence of God and the possibility of metaphysics, knew that seminary students were fed a woefully inadequate diet of theses and proofs, and that their familiarity with most of history's great thinkers was reduced to simplistic caricatures. Copleston set out to redress the wrong by writing a complete history of Western philosophy, one crackling with incident and intellectual excitement -- and one that gives full place to each thinker, presenting his thought in a beautifully rounded manner and showing his links to those who went before and to those who came after him.

The result of Copleston's prodigious labors is a history of philosophy that is unlikely ever to be surpassed. *Thought* magazine summed up the general agreement among scholars and students alike when it reviewed Copleston's *A History of Philosophy* as "broad-minded and objective, comprehensive and scholarly, unified and well proportioned... We cannot recommend [it] too highly."

A History of Philosophy, Vol. 1: Greece and Rome, From the Pre-Socratics to Plotinus Details

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From Reader Review A History of Philosophy, Vol. 1: Greece and Rome, From the Pre-Socratics to Plotinus for online ebook

Nigel Dawson says

This series is probably the best general overview of the history of philosophy currently available. The prose can be somewhat dry and technical, but this is to be expected. Volume One is best read with greek/english and latin/english dictionaries close at hand.

Wayne says

THRILLED !!! to recently find in my local bookshop in the Secondhand section unsullied and complete the 12 Volume Set of Father Frederick Copleston's History of Philosophy.

Any Guilt on breaking up the set ?

By no means.

Firstly these volumes were written exclusively for ME !!!

Father Copleston as a convert and Jesuit priest took on the task of writing these books for Catholic Seminarian Students of Philosophy because what they had was not too impressive.

Now as an ex-seminarian and Retired Catholic I have for many years recalled with nostalgia, searched high and low for these books, left traces of the Greek Philosophers in several poems, re-created poems from the fragments of my memory of the fragments of surviving text, poems of Heraclitus' views...very Greek I now find, as philosophy was written in poetic form, perhaps to aid recall.

Those Greeks were always the ones who intrigued and amazed me(still do!!) The first ever known to record their philosophical thoughts - I refuse to believe that there were not pre-historic men and women and children who were not led into this realm (are those negatives making sense ?)- the Greeks, having only native wit and their observations of the world, aided by creative uncommon and common sense, made some very modern (atomic theory) and taken-for-granted discoveries eg., that the earth was a sphere. Someone also worked out how to weigh the earth!!!

Some philosophers were atheists.eg.Epicurus, Anaximander, ,Democritus Strato.

Secondly, re my guiltless breaking up of the set, I have neither the time, money or space to read, acquire or store the complete set. So why not leave them there to thrill another ex-seminarian, ex-priest, priest or just good old philosophy addict.

It could be YOU!!!

(If you reside outside Australia,try Glee Books at Dulwich Hill, NSW!)

James F says

Returning to reading philosophy as a "project", I decided to begin with Copleston's history. This was recommended background/reference material for my college History of Philosophy classes back in 1971-72, but at the time I only finished six or seven of the nine volumes. (The tenth and eleventh volumes seen in one reprint edition are a collection of articles and a separate book not intended as part of the History.)

Father Copleston was a Jesuit priest, who began this as a history for students in Catholic seminaries who were simultaneously studying Thomist philosophy. It quickly became a standard history outside that target audience because there was nothing approaching a comprehensive history of philosophy in English at the time which was at all recent or based on contemporary scholarship. This first book in particular bears the marks of its original purpose, with constant comparisons of the systems described to the "truth" as understood by St. Thomas Aquinas and the Catholic Church. The next two volumes of course are on mediaeval, mainly Catholic philosophy, which is Copleston's forte and which is never treated sufficiently in more secular histories, while by the time he got to modern philosophy he was consciously writing for a largely non-Catholic audience.

Although his comments sometimes seem rather intrusive to a non-Catholic reader, they are always clearly separated from his descriptions, and there is something to be said for having a known, admitted bias that one can take into account and correct for as opposed to a supposedly objective text where the bias (and there will always be a bias in a field as controversy-laden as philosophy) has to be guessed at from the treatment itself. Moreover, when he arrives at the modern systems, his own views are so totally foreign to the systems discussed that he is probably more "objective" than any secular writer could be, who would necessarily sympathize with one of the tendencies under discussion.

There is however, one important problem due to his viewpoint, which is in the selection of what he discusses and what he leaves out. He is clearly weakest on the Presocratics, and in fact he begins with an apologia for including them at all; his "justification" is that they are needed to understand where Plato and Aristotle are coming from. So he discusses them largely from that perspective, and also accepts Aristotle's view that they are talking about what Aristotle is talking about, a metaphysical substratum, where in fact (in my opinion) they are doing something totally different, namely cosmogeny -- talking about not what the world *is* but where it *came from*. His discussion of Plato and Aristotle occupies most of the book, and is very thorough, and probably as accurate as could be hoped for in a book this size. These are difficult thinkers, and refreshingly he does not "dumb down" his treatment -- his target audience of seminarians he assumes has some reading knowledge of Greek and Latin, and some prior knowledge of philosophy from a Catholic viewpoint. He gives more space than most recent histories of Greek thought to the post-Aristotelian systems, since he naturally considers neo-Platonism as the culminating synthesis on the point of being taken into Christian theology.

Within the systems, it is sometimes frustrating to a non-religious person that he will mention that a philosopher wrote on logical or epistemological issues, then pass over that to describe in detail what he is interested in -- what they thought about God and the soul, and how it is similar or different from the "true" account of the Church. While taken as a whole, Copleston's history is probably still one of the best (at least in comprehensiveness and refusal to oversimplify), this particular volume is not the best part of his history or the best work on the history of Greek philosophy -- I would have to nominate W.K.C. Guthrie's multi-volume *History of Greek Philosophy* for that -- and there are many better books on specific tendencies or philosophers.

Micheal says

he uses general views on the issue under focus to get to the specifics. He turns the disadvantage of his beliefs effecting on his writings as a mean to make the text fluent but I have to admit it's a bit dry and sometimes his beliefs are overly stressed in statements he made but overall it's a good reading of history of Philosophy.

C30net says

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Pmacdougald says

Should honestly take some more time to give a more substantive review, but here is a quick-hitter.

Copleston, as everyone is fond of mentioning, is extremely erudite, and writes generally in a lucid and easily-understandable English. He has a tremendous talent for presenting what can be rather difficult concepts (especially in the case of, e.g., Aristotle's Metaphysics or Plotinus' Neo-Platonism) in readily comprehensible prose. He is a Jesuit, but is generally fair-minded, even if he does have a tendency to conclude chapters with a reaffirmation of the correctness of revealed religion, and it is not uncommon for him to make moralistic asides that, to an atheistic reader in 2015, date him and his work considerably.

Substantively, however, the only thing I really have to complain about is the lack of translations provided for the Greek and Latin which he uses rather liberally in the text. I think that I was able to understand most of what he wrote about most of the authors – especially the key points about Plato and Aristotle – but Copleston assumes a knowledge of Greek and Latin in his readers, and as a result sometimes there will be words, passages, and entire paragraphs that are almost entirely incomprehensible. This was especially a problem when dealing with Aristotle's various classifications (provided all in untranslated Greek), and especially the Latin Stoics, where Copleston, rather than summing up their thought in English, often provided a paragraph-length Latin block quotation from e.g. Seneca or Lucretius which he felt illustrated his point more artfully than could be reconstructed in English. Perhaps, but plebes like me can't understand a word of it.

Erik Graff says

By the spring of eighty I'd been out of school for almost two years. Work in psychiatric childcare (adolescent boys) which had filled that time was personally, but not professionally, rewarding. The living situation had, however, vastly improved since moving in with the brothers Miley the spring previous. Socially, they had helped me reintegrate with old high school friends, many of whom I hadn't seen for the nine years I'd been away in college and seminary.

Intellectually, however, I was dissatisfied. Michael Miley styled himself a writer and acted accordingly. Beyond letters, and there were lots of those, I was out of the habit. Indeed, only the spur of school, of being assured readers and intelligent criticism, had ever inspired me to write seriously since childhood. Although the threshold to writing was high, I'd learned to enjoy crossing it and missed the inspiration and opportunities school afforded. Working ten hour shifts was simply not compatible.

Thus far my academic training had led me from general liberal arts to history, to ancient history and textual criticism on the one hand while leading me to the same result through the study of continental depth psychology on the other. The same fascination with understanding very different mentalities united my

interests in both the ancients and those alienists who, like Freud and Jung, saw and sought connections between the bizarre ideations of their patients and the thought-forms expressed in the ancient texts.

Clearly, the next step was to study philosophy and to do so much more systematically than previously. Thus, Copleston's first volume and, eventually, matriculation in Loyola University Chicago.

Pastor Matt says

The late Dr. Copleston's mammoth nine volume work is a momentous achievement. I look forward to the next eight volumes (which run to the late 1940's and John Paul Sartre) but for many, his History will frustrate. Copleston (like Kenny) sometimes "geeks out" so much over a particular philosopher that he adds too much for the student and other times he quotes directly from Greek and Latin sources, without translating them and this will also frustrate beginners. Still, it is a historic accomplishment.

Jafar Isbarov says

Few expository works have achieved as unanimous authority as *A History of Philosophy* series. Having just finished the first entry, now I can see why.

As it is clear from the title, this is an overview of history of philosophy, stretched over 10 volumes. Copleston undertook this massive project to supply "Catholic ecclesiastical seminaries with a work that should be somewhat more detailed and of wider scope than the text-books commonly in use and which at the same time should endeavor to exhibit the logical development and inter-connection of philosophical systems." It is indeed considerably more detailed than any other work of similar scope, and has wider scope than any other work of similar depth.

Any negative comment I can make on this work would be mere nitpick, and any praise by me would be admiration rather than critical approval. All I can say that would possibly be worth to hear is this. From where I am standing, namely an amateur philosophy student, nothing looks improvable in this volume.

It was a long and tedious read and I can safely say that philosophy remains out of my reading plans for a few months to come. I also do not know whether I can stand a 600-pages-long history of almost entirely Christian philosophy, which happens to be content of the second volume. In any case, every single volume of the series, including the second, is in my to-read list for now.

Ali says

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David Withun says

One of the best introductions to ancient Greek philosophy out there. My only two complaints about it are: 1. Like many texts published a half century or longer ago Coplestone consistently leaves Greek and Latin phrases that he quotes (even at some considerable length) untranslated. For modern readers like myself, this only serves as a reminder of how far downhill our educational standards have gone -- we don't know ancient Greek and/or Latin anymore! 2. Coplestone's choice of verbiage is often far more dense and complicated than it has to be. I've never seen such a difficult explanation of Plato's theory of the Forms. Those two criticisms aside, the book is a great over all and well laid out in its presentation. I read this alongside the opening chapters of Bertrand Russell's much lengthier "History of Western Philosophy" and the combination of the two, I think, served me well as I was able to receive the same information from two very different perspectives. Great learning experience!

Pinkyivan says

Well written, extensive and informative, objective and respectful, systematic and complete. The best history of philosophy anyone could ask for, across all both general and specific overviews I'm aware of. Thanks to the anon who shat on Russel and recommend this as an alternative.

Ahmad Sharabiani says

A History of Philosophy Volume 1: Greece and Rome, From the Pre-Socratics to Plotinus (A History of Philosophy #1), Frederick Charles Copleston

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Samantha Rose says

This book is too biased. I didn't even finish reading the first chapter. In the introduction he even bashes biased historians. Poo poo, I was very excited to pick this up as well.

Atefeh says