



Russell

History of Western Philosophy

Bertrand
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History of Western Philosophy

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PREFACE

A few words of apology and explanation are called for if this book is to escape even more severe censure than it doubtless deserves.

Apology is due to the specialists on various schools and individual philosophers. With the possible exception of Leibniz, every philosopher of whom I treat is better known to some others than to me. If, however, books covering a wide field are to be written at all, it is inevitable, since we are not immortal, that those who write such books should spend less time on any one part than can be spent by a man who concentrates on a single author or a brief period. Some, whose scholarly austerity is unbending, will conclude that books covering a wide field should not be written at all, or, if written, should consist of monographs by a multitude of authors. There is, however, something lost when many authors co-operate. If there is any unity in the movement of history, if there is any intimate relation between what goes before and what comes later, it is necessary, for setting this forth, that earlier and later periods should be synthesized in a single mind. The student of Rousseau may have difficulty in doing justice to his connection with the Sparta of Plato and Plutarch; the historian of Sparta may not be prophetically conscious of Hobbes and Fichte and Lenin. To bring out such relations is one of the purposes of this book, and it is a purpose which only a wide survey can fulfil.

There are many histories of philosophy, but none of them, so far as I know, has quite the purpose that I have set myself. Philosophers are both effects and causes: effects of their social circumstances and of the politics and institutions of their time; causes (if they are fortunate) of beliefs which mould the politics and institutions of later ages. In most histories of philosophy, each philosopher appears as in a vacuum; his opinions are set forth unrelated except, at most, to those of earlier philosophers. I have tried, on the contrary,

to exhibit each philosopher, as far as truth permits, as an outcome of his milieu, a man in whom were crystallized and concentrated thoughts and feelings which, in a vague and diffused form, were common to the community of which he was a part.

This has required the insertion of certain chapters of purely social history. No one can understand the Stoics and Epicureans without some knowledge of the Hellenistic age, or the scholastics without a modicum of understanding of the growth of the Church from the fifth to the thirteenth centuries. I have therefore set forth briefly those parts of the main historical outlines that seemed to me to have had most influence on philosophical thought, and I have done this with most fullness where the history may be expected to be unfamiliar to some readers—for example, in regard to the early Middle Ages. But in these historical chapters I have rigidly excluded whatever seemed to have little or no bearing on contemporary or subsequent philosophy.

The problem of selection, in such a book as the present, is very difficult. Without detail, a book becomes jejune and uninteresting; with detail, it is in danger of becoming intolerably lengthy. I have sought a compromise, by treating only those philosophers who seem to me to have considerable importance, and mentioning, in connection with them, such details as, even if not of fundamental importance, have value on account of some illustrative or vivifying quality.

Philosophy, from the earliest times, has been not merely an affair of the schools, or of disputation between a handful of learned men. It has been an integral part of the life of the community, and as such I have tried to consider it. If there is any merit in this book, it is from this point of view that it is derived.

This book owes its existence to Dr Albert C. Barnes, having been originally designed and partly delivered as lectures at the Barnes Foundation in Pennsylvania.

As in most of my work during the years since 1932, I have been greatly assisted in research and in many other ways by my wife, Patricia Russell.

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Sceptical Essays

Bertrand Russell

'These propositions may seem mild, yet, if accepted, they would absolutely revolutionise human life.'

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INTRODUCTION

The conceptions of life and the world which we call 'philosophical' are a product of two factors: one, inherited religious and ethical conceptions; the other, the sort of investigation which may be called 'scientific', using this word in its broadest sense. Individual philosophers have differed widely in regard to the proportions in which these two factors entered into their systems, but it is the presence of both, in some degree, that characterizes philosophy.

'Philosophy' is a word which has been used in many ways, some wider, some narrower. I propose to use it in a very wide sense, which I will now try to explain.

Philosophy, as I shall understand the word, is something intermediate between theology and science. Like theology, it consists of speculations on matters as to which definite knowledge has, so far, been unascertainable; but like science, it appeals to human reason rather than to authority, whether that of tradition or that of revelation. All definite knowledge—so I should contend—belongs to science; all *dogma* as to what surpasses definite knowledge belongs to theology. But between theology and science there is a No Man's Land, exposed to attack from both sides; this No Man's Land is philosophy. Almost all the questions of most interest to speculative minds are such as science cannot answer, and the confident answers of theologians no longer seem so convincing as they did in former centuries. Is the world divided into mind and matter, and, if so, what is mind and what is matter? Is mind subject to matter, or is it possessed of independent powers? Has the universe any unity or purpose? Is it evolving towards some goal? Are there really laws of nature, or do we believe in them only because of our innate love of order? Is man what he seems to the astronomer, a tiny lump of impure carbon and

water impotently crawling on a small and unimportant planet? Or is he what he appears to Hamlet? Is he perhaps both at once? Is there a way of living that is noble and another that is base, or are all ways of living merely futile? If there is a way of living that is noble, in what does it consist, and how shall we achieve it? Must the good be eternal in order to deserve to be valued, or is it worth seeking even if the universe is inexorably moving towards death? Is there such a thing as wisdom, or is what seems such merely the ultimate refinement of folly? To such questions no answer can be found in the laboratory. Theologies have professed to give answers, all too definite; but their very definiteness causes modern minds to view them with suspicion. The studying of these questions, if not the answering of them, is the business of philosophy.

Why, then, you may ask, waste time on such insoluble problems? To this one may answer as a historian, or as an individual facing the terror of cosmic loneliness.

The answer of the historian, in so far as I am capable of giving it, will appear in the course of this work. Ever since men became capable of free speculation, their actions, in innumerable important respects, have depended upon their theories as to the world and human life, as to what is good and what is evil. This is as true in the present day as at any former time. To understand an age or a nation, we must understand its philosophy, and to understand its philosophy we must ourselves be in some degree philosophers. There is here a reciprocal causation: the circumstances of men's lives do much to determine their philosophy, but, conversely, their philosophy does much to determine their circumstances. This interaction throughout the centuries will be the topic of the following pages.

There is also, however, a more personal answer. Science tells us what we can know, but what we can know is little, and if we forget how much we cannot know we become insensitive to many things of very great importance. Theology, on the other hand, induces a dogmatic belief that we have knowledge where in fact we have ignorance, and by doing so generates a kind of impertinent insolence towards the universe. Uncertainty, in the presence of vivid hopes and fears, is painful, but must be endured if we wish to live without the support of comforting fairy tales. It is not good either to forget the questions that philosophy asks, or to persuade ourselves that we have found indubitable answers to them. To teach how to live without certainty, and yet without being paralysed by hesitation, is perhaps the chief thing that philosophy, in our age, can still do for those who study it.

Philosophy, as distinct from theology, began in Greece in the sixth century B.C. After running its course in antiquity, it was again submerged by theology as Christianity rose and Rome fell. Its second great period, from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries, was dominated by the Catholic Church,

except for a few great rebels, such as the Emperor Frederick II (1195–1250). This period was brought to an end by the confusions that culminated in the Reformation. The third period, from the seventeenth century to the present day, is dominated, more than either of its predecessors, by science; traditional religious beliefs remain important, but are felt to need justification, and are modified wherever science seems to make this imperative. Few of the philosophers of this period are orthodox from a Catholic standpoint, and the secular State is more important in their speculations than the Church.

Social cohesion and individual liberty, like religion and science, are in a state of conflict or uneasy compromise throughout the whole period. In Greece, social cohesion was secured by loyalty to the City State; even Aristotle, though in his time Alexander was making the City State obsolete, could see no merit in any other kind of polity. The degree to which the individual's liberty was curtailed by his duty to the City varied widely. In Sparta he had as little liberty as in modern Germany or Russia; in Athens, in spite of occasional persecutions, citizens had, in the best period, a very extraordinary freedom from restrictions imposed by the State. Greek thought down to Aristotle is dominated by religious and patriotic devotion to the City; its ethical systems are adapted to the lives of citizens and have a large political element. When the Greeks became subject, first to the Macedonians, and then to the Romans, the conceptions appropriate to their days of independence were no longer applicable. This produced, on the one hand, a loss of vigour through the breach with tradition, and, on the other hand, a more individual and less social ethic. The Stoics thought of the virtuous life as a relation of the soul to God, rather than as a relation of the citizen to the State. They thus prepared the way for Christianity, which, like Stoicism, was originally unpolitical, since, during its first three centuries, its adherents were devoid of influence on government. Social cohesion, during the six and a half centuries from Alexander to Constantine, was secured, not by philosophy and not by ancient loyalties, but by force, first that of armies and then that of civil administration. Roman armies, Roman roads, Roman law, and Roman officials first created and then preserved a powerful centralized State. Nothing was attributable to Roman philosophy, since there was none.

During this long period, the Greek ideas inherited from the age of freedom underwent a gradual process of transformation. Some of the old ideas, notably those which we should regard as specifically religious, gained in relative importance; others, more rationalistic, were discarded because they no longer suited the spirit of the age. In this way the later pagans trimmed the Greek tradition until it became suitable for incorporation in Christian doctrine.

Christianity popularized an important opinion, already implicit in the teaching of the Stoics, but foreign to the general spirit of antiquity—I mean,

the opinion that a man's duty to God is more imperative than his duty to the State.¹ This opinion—that 'we ought to obey God rather than Man', as Socrates and the Apostles said—survived the conversion of Constantine, because the early Christian emperors were Arians or inclined to Arianism. When the emperors became orthodox, it fell into abeyance. In the Byzantine Empire it remained latent, as also in the subsequent Russian Empire, which derived its Christianity from Constantinople.² But in the West, where the Catholic emperors were almost immediately replaced (except in parts of Gaul) by heretical barbarian conquerors, the superiority of religious to political allegiance survived, and to some extent still survives.

The barbarian invasion put an end, for six centuries, to the civilization of western Europe. It lingered in Ireland until the Danes destroyed it in the ninth century; before its extinction there it produced one notable figure, Scotus Erigena. In the Eastern Empire, Greek civilization, in a desiccated form, survived, as in a museum, till the fall of Constantinople in 1453, but nothing of importance to the world came out of Constantinople except an artistic tradition and Justinian's Codes of Roman law.

During the period of darkness, from the end of the fifth century to the middle of the eleventh, the western Roman world underwent some very interesting changes. The conflict between duty to God and duty to the State, which Christianity had introduced, took the form of a conflict between Church and king. The ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Pope extended over Italy, France, and Spain, Great Britain and Ireland, Germany, Scandinavia, and Poland. At first, outside Italy and southern France, his control over bishops and abbots was very slight, but from the time of Gregory VII (late eleventh century) it became real and effective. From that time on, the clergy, throughout western Europe, formed a single organization directed from Rome, seeking power intelligently and relentlessly, and usually victorious, until after the year 1300, in their conflicts with secular rulers. The conflict between Church and State was not only a conflict between clergy and laity; it was also a renewal of the conflict between the Mediterranean world and the northern barbarians. The unity of the Church echoed the unity of the Roman Empire; its liturgy was Latin, and its dominant men were mostly Italian, Spanish, or southern French. Their education, when education revived, was classical; their conceptions of law and government would have been more intelligible to Marcus Aurelius than they were to contemporary monarchs. The Church represented at once continuity with the past and what was most civilized in the present.

¹ This opinion was not unknown in earlier times: it is stated, for example, in the *Antigone* of Sophocles. But before the Stoics those who held it were few.

² That is why the modern Russian does not think that we ought to obey dialectical materialism rather than Stalin.