

*BERTRAND RUSSELL*

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A HISTORY  
OF WESTERN  
PHILOSOPHY

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**A HISTORY  
OF WESTERN  
PHILOSOPHY**

A Touchstone Book

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## Preface

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**M**ANY histories of philosophy exist, and it has not been my purpose merely to add one to their number. My purpose is to exhibit philosophy as an integral part of social and political life: not as the isolated speculations of remarkable individuals, but as both an effect and a cause of the character of the various communities in which different systems flourished. This purpose demands more account of general history than is usually given by historians of philosophy. I have found this particularly necessary as regards periods with which the general reader cannot be assumed to be familiar. The great age of the scholastic philosophy was an outcome of the reforms of the eleventh century, and these, in turn, were a reaction against previous corruption. Without some knowledge of the centuries between the fall of Rome and the rise of the medieval Papacy, the intellectual atmosphere of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries can hardly be understood. In dealing with this period, as with others, I have aimed at giving only so much general history as I thought necessary for the sympathetic comprehension of philosophers in relation to the times that formed them and the times that they helped to form.

One consequence of this point of view is that the importance which it gives to a philosopher is often not that which he deserves on account of his philosophic merit. For my part, for example, I consider Spinoza a greater philosopher than Locke, but he was far less influential; I have therefore treated him much more briefly than Locke. Some men—for example, Rousseau and Byron—though not philosophers at all in the academic sense, have so profoundly affected the prevailing philosophic temper that the development of philosophy cannot be understood if they are

ignored. Even pure men of action are sometimes of great importance in this respect; very few philosophers have influenced philosophy as much as Alexander the Great, Charlemagne, or Napoleon. Lycurgus, if only he had existed, would have been a still more notable example.

In attempting to cover such a vast stretch of time, it is necessary to have very drastic principles of selection. I have come to the conclusion, from reading standard histories of philosophy, that very short accounts convey nothing of value to the reader; I have therefore omitted altogether (with few exceptions) men who did not seem to me to deserve a fairly full treatment. In the case of the men whom I have discussed, I have mentioned what seemed relevant as regards their lives and their social surroundings; I have even sometimes recorded intrinsically unimportant details when I considered them illustrative of a man or of his times.

Finally, I owe a word of explanation and apology to specialists on any part of my enormous subject. It is obviously impossible to know as much about every philosopher as can be known about him by a man whose field is less wide; I have no doubt that every single philosopher whom I have mentioned, with the exception of Leibniz, is better known to many men than to me. If, however, this were considered a sufficient reason for respectful silence, it would follow that no man should undertake to treat of more than some narrow strip of history. The influence of Sparta on Rousseau, of Plato on Christian philosophy until the thirteenth century, of the Nestorians on the Arabs and thence on Aquinas, of Saint Ambrose on liberal political philosophy from the rise of the Lombard cities until the present day, are some among the themes of which only a comprehensive history can treat. On such grounds I ask the indulgence of those readers who find my knowledge of

*this or that portion of my subject less adequate than it would have been if there had been no need to remember "time's winged chariot."*

*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 last thirteen years, I have been greatly assisted, in research and in many other ways, by my wife, Patricia Russell.*

**BERTRAND RUSSELL**

# Introductory

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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 uni-

verse 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 paralyzed 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. 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.\* 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

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

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.

The secular power, on the contrary, was in the hands of kings and barons of Teutonic descent, who endeavoured to preserve what they could of the institutions that they had brought out of the forests of Germany. Absolute power was alien to those institutions, and so was what appeared to these vigorous conquerors as a dull and spiritless legality. The king had to share his power with the feudal aristocracy, but all alike expected to be allowed occasional outbursts of passion in the form of war, murder, pillage, or rape. Monarchs might repent, for they were sincerely pious, and, after all, repentance was itself a form of passion. But the Church could never produce in them the quiet regularity of good behaviour which a modern employer demands, and usually obtains, of his employees. What was the use of conquering the world if they could not drink and murder and love as the spirit moved them? And why should they, with their armies of proud knights, submit to the orders of bookish men, vowed to celibacy and destitute of armed force? In spite of ecclesiastical disapproval, they preserved the duel and trial by battle, and they developed tournaments and courtly love. Occasionally, in a fit of rage, they would even murder eminent churchmen.

All the armed force was on the side of the kings, and yet the Church was victorious. The Church won, partly because it had almost a

monopoly of education, partly because the kings were perpetually at war with each other, but mainly because, with very few exceptions, rulers and people alike profoundly believed that the Church possessed the power of the keys. The Church could decide whether a king should spend eternity in heaven or in hell; the Church could absolve subjects from the duty of allegiance, and so stimulate rebellion. The Church, moreover, represented order in place of anarchy, and consequently won the support of the rising mercantile class. In Italy, especially, this last consideration was decisive.

The Teutonic attempt to preserve at least a partial independence of the Church expressed itself not only in politics, but also in art, romance, chivalry, and war. It expressed itself very little in the intellectual world, because education was almost wholly confined to the clergy. The explicit philosophy of the Middle Ages is not an accurate mirror of the times, but only of what was thought by one party. Among ecclesiastics, however—especially among the Franciscan friars—a certain number, for various reasons, were at variance with the Pope. In Italy, moreover, culture spread to the laity some centuries sooner than it did north of the Alps. Frederick II, who tried to found a new religion, represents the extreme of anti-papal culture; Thomas Aquinas, who was born in the kingdom of Naples where Frederick II was supreme, remains to this day the classic exponent of papal philosophy. Dante, some fifty years later, achieved a synthesis, and gave the only balanced exposition of the complete medieval world of ideas.

After Dante, both for political and for intellectual reasons, the medieval philosophical synthesis broke down. It had, while it lasted, a quality of tidiness and miniature completeness; whatever the system took account of was placed with precision with relation to the other contents of its very finite cosmos. But the Great Schism, the conciliar movement, and the Renaissance papacy led up to the Reformation, which destroyed the unity of Christendom and the scholastic theory of government that centered round the Pope. In the Renaissance period new knowledge, both of antiquity and of the earth's surface, made men tired of systems, which were felt to be mental prisons. The Copernican astronomy assigned to the earth and to man a humbler position than they had enjoyed in the Ptolemaic theory. Pleasure in new facts took the place, among intelligent men

of pleasure in reasoning, analysing, and systematizing. Although in art the Renaissance is still orderly, in thought it prefers a large and fruitful disorder. In this respect, Montaigne is the most typical exponent of the age.

In the theory of politics, as in everything except art, there was a collapse of order. The Middle Ages, though turbulent in practice, were dominated in thought by a passion for legality and by a very precise theory of political power. All power is ultimately from God; He has delegated power to the Pope in sacred things and to the Emperor in secular matters. But Pope and Emperor alike lost their importance during the fifteenth century. The Pope became merely one of the Italian princes, engaged in the incredibly complicated and unscrupulous game of Italian power politics. The new national monarchies in France, Spain, and England had, in their own territories, a power with which neither Pope nor Emperor could interfere. The national State, largely owing to gunpowder, acquired an influence over men's thoughts and feelings which it had not had before, and which progressively destroyed what remained of the Roman belief in the unity of civilization.

This political disorder found expression in Machiavelli's *Prince*. In the absence of any guiding principle, politics becomes a naked struggle for power; *The Prince* gives shrewd advice as to how to play this game successfully. What had happened in the great age of Greece happened again in Renaissance Italy: traditional moral restraints disappeared, because they were seen to be associated with superstition; the liberation from fetters made individuals energetic and creative, producing a rare florescence of genius; but the anarchy and treachery which inevitably resulted from the decay of morals made Italians collectively impotent, and they fell, like the Greeks, under the domination of nations less civilized than themselves but not so destitute of social cohesion.

The result, however, was less disastrous than in the case of Greece, because the newly powerful nations, with the exception of Spain, showed themselves as capable of great achievement as the Italians had been.

From the sixteenth century onward, the history of European thought is dominated by the Reformation. The Reformation was a complex many-sided movement, and owed its success to a variety of

causes. In the main, it was a revolt of the northern nations against the renewed dominion of Rome. Religion was the force that had subdued the North, but religion in Italy had decayed: the papacy remained as an institution, and extracted a huge tribute from Germany and England, but these nations, which were still pious, could feel no reverence for the Borgias and Medicis, who professed to save souls from purgatory in return for cash which they squandered on luxury and immorality. National motives, economic motives, and moral motives all combined to strengthen the revolt against Rome. Moreover the Princes soon perceived that, if the Church in their territories became merely national, they would be able to dominate it, and would thus become much more powerful at home than they had been while sharing dominion with the Pope. For all these reasons, Luther's theological innovations were welcomed by rulers and peoples alike throughout the greater part of northern Europe.

The Catholic Church was derived from three sources. Its sacred history was Jewish, its theology was Greek, its government and canon law were, at least indirectly, Roman. The Reformation rejected the Roman elements, softened the Greek elements, and greatly strengthened the Judaic elements. It thus co-operated with the nationalist forces which were undoing the work of social cohesion which had been effected first by the Roman Empire and then by the Roman Church. In Catholic doctrine, divine revelation did not end with the scriptures, but continued from age to age through the medium of the Church, to which, therefore, it was the duty of the individual to submit his private opinions. Protestants, on the contrary, rejected the Church as a vehicle of revelation; truth was to be sought only in the Bible, which each man could interpret for himself. If men differed in their interpretation, there was no divinely appointed authority to decide the dispute. In practice, the State claimed the right that had formerly belonged to the Church, but this was a usurpation. In Protestant theory, there should be no earthly intermediary between the soul and God.

The effects of this change were momentous. Truth was no longer to be ascertained by consulting authority, but by inward meditation. There was a tendency, quickly developed, towards anarchism in politics, and, in religion, towards mysticism, which had always fitted with difficulty into the framework of Catholic orthodoxy. There

came to be not one Protestantism, but a multitude of sects; not one philosophy opposed to scholasticism, but as many as there were philosophers; not, as in the thirteenth century, one Emperor opposed to the Pope, but a large number of heretical kings. The result, in thought as in literature, was a continually deepening subjectivism, operating at first as a wholesome liberation from spiritual slavery, but advancing steadily towards a personal isolation inimical to social sanity.

Modern philosophy begins with Descartes, whose fundamental certainty is the existence of himself and his thoughts, from which the external world is to be inferred. This was only the first stage in a development, through Berkeley and Kant, to Fichte, for whom everything is only an emanation of the ego. This was insanity, and, from this extreme, philosophy has been attempting, ever since, to escape into the world of every-day common sense.

With subjectivism in philosophy, anarchism in politics goes hand in hand. Already during Luther's lifetime, unwelcome and unacknowledged disciples had developed the doctrine of Anabaptism, which, for a time, dominated the city of Münster. The Anabaptists repudiated all law, since they held that the good man will be guided at every moment by the Holy Spirit, who cannot be bound by formulas. From this premise they arrive at communism and sexual promiscuity; they were therefore exterminated after a heroic resistance. But their doctrine, in softened forms, spread to Holland, England and America; historically, it is the source of Quakerism. A fiercer form of anarchism, no longer connected with religion, arose in the nineteenth century. In Russia, in Spain, and to a lesser degree in Italy, it had considerable success, and to this day it remains a bugbear of the American immigration authorities. This modern form, though anti-religious, has still much of the spirit of early Protestantism; it differs mainly in directing against secular governments the hostility that Luther directed against popes.

Subjectivity, once let loose, could not be confined within limits until it had run its course. In morals, the Protestant emphasis on the individual conscience was essentially anarchic. Habit and custom were so strong that, except in occasional outbreaks such as that of Münster, the disciples of individualism in ethics continued to act in a manner which was conventionally virtuous. But this was a precarious equilibrium. The eighteenth-century cult of "sensibility" began to break it down: an act was admired, not for its good consequences, or for its

conformity to a moral code, but for the emotion that inspired it. Out of this attitude developed the cult of the hero, as it is expressed by Carlyle and Nietzsche, and the Byronic cult of violent passion of no matter what kind.

The romantic movement, in art, in literature, and in politics, is bound up with this subjective way of judging men, not as members of a community, but as aesthetically delightful objects of contemplation. Tigers are more beautiful than sheep, but we prefer them behind bars. The typical romantic removes the bars and enjoys the magnificent leaps with which the tiger annihilates the sheep. He exhorts men to imagine themselves tigers, and when he succeeds the results are not wholly pleasant.

Against the more insane forms of subjectivism in modern times there have been various reactions. First, a half-way compromise philosophy, the doctrine of liberalism, which attempted to assign the respective spheres of government and the individual. This begins, in its modern form, with Locke, who is as much opposed to "enthusiasm"—the individualism of the Anabaptists—as to absolute authority and blind subservience to tradition. A more thoroughgoing revolt leads to the doctrine of State worship, which assigns to the State the position that Catholicism gave to the Church, or even, sometimes, to God. Hobbes, Rousseau, and Hegel represent different phases of this theory, and their doctrines are embodied practically in Cromwell, Napoleon, and modern Germany. Communism, in theory, is far removed from such philosophies, but is driven, in practice, to a type of community very similar to that which results from State worship.

Throughout this long development, from 600 B.C. to the present day, philosophers have been divided into those who wished to tighten social bonds and those who wished to relax them. With this difference others have been associated. The disciplinarians have advocated some system of dogma, either old or new, and have therefore been compelled to be, in a greater or less degree, hostile to science, since their dogmas could not be proved empirically. They have almost invariably taught that happiness is not the good, but that "nobility" or "heroism" is to be preferred. They have had a sympathy with the irrational parts of human nature, since they have felt reason to be inimical to social cohesion. The libertarians, on the other hand, with the exception of the extreme anarchists, have tended to be scientific, utilitarian, rational-



istic, hostile to violent passion, and enemies of all the more profound forms of religion. This conflict existed in Greece before the rise of what we recognize as philosophy, and is already quite explicit in the earliest Greek thought. In changing forms, it has persisted down to the present day, and no doubt will persist for many ages to come.

It is clear that each party to this dispute—as to all that persist through long periods of time—is partly right and partly wrong. Social cohesion is a necessity, and mankind has never yet succeeded in enforcing cohesion by merely rational arguments. Every community is exposed to two opposite dangers: ossification through too much discipline and reverence for tradition, on the one hand; on the other hand, dissolution, or subjection to foreign conquest, through the growth of an individualism and personal independence that makes co-operation impossible. In general, important civilizations start with a rigid and superstitious system, gradually relaxed, and leading, at a certain stage, to a period of brilliant genius, while the good of the old tradition remains and the evil inherent in its dissolution has not yet developed. But as the evil unfolds, it leads to anarchy, thence, inevitably, to a new tyranny, producing a new synthesis secured by a new system of dogma. The doctrine of liberalism is an attempt to escape from this endless oscillation. The essence of liberalism is an attempt to secure a social order not based on irrational dogma, and insuring stability without involving more restraints than are necessary for the preservation of the community. Whether this attempt can succeed only the future can determine.