



A NEW HISTORY OF

Western Philosophy

ANTHONY KENNY

'Not only an authoritative guide to the history of philosophy, but also a compelling introduction to every major area of philosophical enquiry.'

Times Higher Education

A NEW HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

In Four Parts

ANTHONY
KENNY



CLARENDON PRESS • OXFORD

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

© Sir Anthony Kenny 2010

The moral rights of the author have been asserted

First published 2007

First published in paperback 2008

Single volume hardback published 2010

This single volume paperback published 2012

Impression: 2

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the
prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted
by law, by licence or under terms agreed with the appropriate reprographics
rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the
above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the
address above

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Data available

ISBN 978-0-19-958988-3 (Hbk.)

ISBN 978-0-19-965649-3 (Pbk.)

Printed in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd., St. Ives plc

A NEW HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

Anthony Kenny's magisterial book leads us through the whole story of Western philosophy, from ancient Greece through the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment into the modern world.

Kenny introduces us to the great thinkers and their ideas, starting with Plato, Aristotle, and the other founders of Western thought. In the second part of the book he takes us through a thousand years of medieval philosophy, and shows us the rich intellectual legacy of Christian thinkers like Augustine, Aquinas, and Ockham. Moving into the early modern period, we explore the great works of Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Leibniz, Spinoza, Hume, and Kant, which remain essential reading today. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Hegel, Mill, Nietzsche, Freud, and Wittgenstein again transformed the way we see the world.

Running through the book are certain themes which have been constant concerns of philosophy since its early beginnings: the fundamental questions of what exists and how we can know about it; the nature of humanity, the mind, truth, and meaning; the place of God in the universe; how we should live and how society should be ordered. Anthony Kenny traces the development of these themes through the centuries: we see how the questions asked and answers offered by the great philosophers of the past remain vividly alive today.

Sir Anthony Kenny has been President of the British Academy, and Pro-Vice Chancellor of the University of Oxford. He has written many books on the philosophy of mind, the philosophy of religion, and the history of philosophy, including both scholarly and popular works on Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, and Wittgenstein.

To the memory of Georg Henrik von Wright

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Why should one study the history of philosophy? There are many reasons, but they fall into two groups: philosophical and historical. We may study the great dead philosophers in order to seek illumination upon themes of our own philosophical inquiry. Or we may wish to understand the people and societies of the past, and read their philosophy to grasp the conceptual climate in which they thought and acted. We may read the philosophers of other ages to help to resolve philosophical problems of abiding concern, or to enter more fully into the intellectual world of a bygone era.

A historian of philosophy should make clear which of these two tasks he is addressing. In this introduction I shall outline the nature of my own project, but first there are many further distinctions to be made. The word 'philosophy' means different things in different mouths. Correspondingly, 'the history of philosophy' also has many meanings. What it means depends on what the particular historian regards as being essential to philosophy. This was true of Aristotle, who was philosophy's first historian, and it was true of Hegel, who hoped he would be its last. The two of them had rather different views of the nature of philosophy.

Both of them, however, studied its history for philosophical rather than historical reasons. Moreover, they shared a particular view of philosophical progress, in which the problems that define the philosophical enterprise are seen and understood ever more clearly, and in which their answers become more and more apparent. Aristotle in the first book of his *Metaphysics*, and Hegel in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* saw the teachings of the earlier philosophers they recorded as halting steps in the direction of a vision they were themselves to expound.

Only someone with supreme self-confidence as a philosopher could write its history in such a way. The temptation for most philosopher historians is to see philosophy not as culminating in their own work, but rather as a gradual progress to whatever philosophical system is currently in fashion. But this temptation should be resisted. There is no force that guarantees philosophical progress in any particular direction.

Indeed, it can be called into question whether philosophy makes any progress at all. The major philosophical problems, some say, are all still being debated after centuries of discussion, and are no nearer to any definitive resolution. In the twentieth century the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote:

You always hear people say that philosophy makes no progress and that the same philosophical problems which were already preoccupying the Greeks are still troubling

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

us today. But people who say that do not understand the reason why it has to be so. The reason is that our language has remained the same and always introduces us to the same questions. . . . I read 'philosophers are no nearer to the meaning of "reality" than Plato got'. What an extraordinary thing! How remarkable that Plato could get so far! Or that we have not been able to get any further! Was it because Plato was *so* clever? (MS 213/424)

The difference between what we might call the Aristotelian and the Wittgensteinian attitude to progress in philosophy derives from two different views of philosophy itself. Philosophy may be viewed as a science, on the one hand, or as an art, on the other. Philosophy is, indeed, uniquely difficult to classify, and resembles both the arts and the sciences.

On the one hand, philosophy seems to be like a science in that the philosopher is in pursuit of truth. Discoveries, it seems, are made in philosophy, and so the philosopher like the scientist has the excitement of belonging to an ongoing, cooperative, cumulative intellectual venture. If so, the philosopher must be familiar with current writing, and keep abreast of the state of the art. On this view, we twenty-first-century philosophers have an advantage over earlier practitioners of the discipline. We stand, no doubt, on the shoulders of other and greater philosophers, but we do stand above them. We have superannuated Plato and Kant.

On the other hand, in the arts, classic works do not date. If we want to learn physics or chemistry, as opposed to their history, we do not nowadays read Newton or Faraday. But we read the literature of Homer and Shakespeare not merely to learn about the quaint things that passed through people's minds in far-off days of long ago. Surely, it may well be argued, the same is true of philosophy. It is not merely in a spirit of antiquarian curiosity that we read Aristotle today. Philosophy is essentially the work of individual genius, and Kant does not supersede Plato any more than Shakespeare supersedes Homer.

There is truth in each of these accounts, but neither is wholly true and neither contains the whole truth. Philosophy is not a science, and there is no state of the art in philosophy. Philosophy is not a matter of expanding knowledge, of acquiring new truths about the world; the philosopher is not in possession of information that is denied to others. Philosophy is not a matter of knowledge; it is a matter of understanding, that is to say, of organizing what is known. But because philosophy is all-embracing, so universal in its field, the organization of knowledge that it demands is something so difficult that only genius can do it. For those of us who are not geniuses, the only way in which we can hope to come to grips with philosophy is by reaching up to the mind of some great philosopher of the past.

Though philosophy is not a science, throughout its history it has had an intimate relation to the sciences. Many disciplines that in antiquity and in the Middle Ages were part of philosophy have long since become independent sciences. A discipline remains philosophical as long as its concepts are unclarified

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

and its methods are controversial. Perhaps no scientific concepts are ever fully clarified, and no scientific methods are ever totally uncontroversial; if so, there is always a philosophical element left in every science. But once problems can be unproblematically stated, when concepts are uncontroversially standardized, and where a consensus emerges for the methodology of solution, then we have a science setting up home independently, rather than a branch of philosophy.

Philosophy, once called the queen of the sciences, and once called their handmaid, is perhaps better thought of as the womb, or the midwife, of the sciences. But in fact sciences emerge from philosophy not so much by parturition as by fission. Two examples, out of many, may serve to illustrate this.

In the seventeenth century philosophers were much exercised by the problem of which of our ideas are innate and which are acquired. This problem split into two problems, one psychological (what do we owe to heredity and what do we owe to environment?) and one epistemological (how much of our knowledge depends on experience and how much is independent of it?). The first question was handed over to psychology; the second question remained philosophical. But the second question itself split into a number of questions, one of which was 'is mathematics merely an extension of logic, or is it an independent body of truth?' This was given a precise answer by the work of logicians and mathematicians in the twentieth century. The answer was not philosophical, but mathematical. So here we had an initial, confused, philosophical question that ramified in two directions—towards psychology and towards mathematics—leaving in the middle a philosophical residue that remains to be churned over, concerning the nature of mathematical propositions.

An earlier example is more complicated. A branch of philosophy given an honoured place by Aristotle is 'theology'. When we read what he says of it today, it seems to us a mixture of astronomy and philosophy of religion. Christian and Muslim Aristotelians added to it elements drawn from the teaching of their sacred books. It was when St Thomas Aquinas, in the thirteenth century, drew a sharp distinction between natural and revealed theology that the first important fission took place, removing from the philosophical agenda the appeals to revelation. It took rather longer for the astronomy and the natural theology to separate out from each other. This example shows that what may be sloughed off by philosophy need not be science but may be a humanistic discipline such as biblical studies. It shows also that the history of philosophy contains examples of fusion as well as of fission.

Philosophy resembles the arts in having a significant relation to a canon. A philosopher situates the problems to be addressed by reference to a series of classical texts. Because it has no specific subject matter, but only characteristic methods, philosophy is defined as a discipline by the activities of its great practitioners. The earliest people whom we recognize as philosophers, the pre-Socratics, were also scientists, and several of them were also religious leaders. They did not

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

yet think of themselves as belonging to a common profession, the one with which we claim continuity. It was Plato who in his writings first used the word 'philosophy' in a sense close to our own. Those of us who call ourselves philosophers today can genuinely claim to be the heirs of Plato and Aristotle. But we are only a small subset of their heirs. What distinguishes us from their other heirs, and what entitles us to inherit their name, is that—unlike the physicists, the astronomers, the medics, the linguists, and so on—we philosophers pursue the goals of Plato and Aristotle only by the same methods as were already available to them.

If philosophy lies somewhere between the sciences and the arts, what is the answer to the question 'is there progress in philosophy?'

There are those who think that the major task of philosophy is to cure us of intellectual confusion. On this, modest, view of the philosopher's role, the tasks to be addressed differ across history, since each period needs a different form of therapy. The knots into which the undisciplined mind ties itself differ from age to age, and different mental motions are necessary to untie the knots. A prevalent malady of our own age, for instance, is the temptation to think of the mind as a computer, whereas earlier ages were tempted to think of it as a telephone exchange, a pedal organ, a homunculus, or a spirit. Maladies of earlier ages may be dormant, such as the belief that the stars are living beings; or they may return, such as the belief that the stars enable one to predict human behaviour.

The therapeutic view of philosophy, however, may seem to allow only for variation over time, not for genuine progress. But that is not necessarily true. A confusion of thought may be so satisfactorily cleared up by a philosopher that it no longer offers temptation to the unwary thinker. One such example will be considered at length in the first part of this history. Parmenides, the founder of the discipline of ontology (the science of being), based much of his system on a systematic confusion between different senses of the verb 'to be'. Plato, in one of his dialogues, sorted out the issues so successfully that there has never again been an excuse for mixing them up: indeed, it now takes a great effort of philosophical imagination to work out exactly what led Parmenides into confusion in the first place.

Progress of this kind is often concealed by its very success: once a philosophical problem is resolved, no one regards it as any more a matter of philosophy. It is like treason in the epigram: 'Treason doth never prosper, what's the reason? | For if it prosper, none dare call it treason.'

The most visible form of philosophical progress is progress in philosophical analysis. Philosophy does not progress by making regular additions to a quantum of information; as has been said, what philosophy offers is not information but understanding. Contemporary philosophers, of course, know some things that the greatest philosophers of the past did not know; but the things they know are not philosophical matters but the truths that have been discovered by the sciences begotten of philosophy. But there are also some things that philosophers of the

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

present day understand that even the greatest philosophers of earlier generations failed to understand. For instance, philosophers clarify language by distinguishing between different senses of words; and, once a distinction has been made, future philosophers have to take account of it in their deliberations.

Take, as an example, the issue of free will. At a certain point in the history of philosophy a distinction was made between two kinds of human freedom: liberty of indifference (ability to do otherwise) and liberty of spontaneity (ability to do what you want). Once this distinction has been made the question 'Do human beings enjoy freedom of the will?' has to be answered in a way that takes account of the distinction. Even someone who believes that the two kinds of liberty in fact coincide has to provide arguments to show this; he cannot simply ignore the distinction and hope to be taken seriously on the topic.

It is unsurprising, given the relationship of philosophy to a canon, that one notable feature of philosophical progress consists in coming to terms with, and interpreting, the thoughts of the great philosophers of the past. The great works of the past do not lose their importance in philosophy—but their intellectual contributions are not static. Each age interprets and applies philosophical classics to its own problems and aspirations. This is, in recent years, most visible in the field of ethics. The ethical works of Plato and Aristotle are as influential in moral thinking today as the works of any twentieth-century moralists—this is easily verified by taking any citation index—but they are being interpreted and applied in ways quite different from the ways in which they were used in the past. These new interpretations and applications do effect a genuine advance in our understanding of Plato and Aristotle, but of course it is understanding of quite a different kind from that which is given by a new study of the chronology of Plato's early dialogues, or a stylometric comparison between Aristotle's various ethical works. The new light we receive resembles rather the enhanced appreciation of Shakespeare we may get by seeing a new and intelligent production of *King Lear*.

The historian of philosophy, whether primarily interested in philosophy or primarily interested in history, cannot help being both a philosopher and a historian. A historian of painting does not have to be a painter, a historian of medicine does not, qua historian, practise medicine. But a historian of philosophy cannot help doing philosophy in the very writing of history. It is not just that someone who knows no philosophy will be a bad historian of philosophy; it is equally true that someone who has no idea how to cook will be a bad historian of cookery. The link between philosophy and its history is a far closer one. The historical task itself forces historians of philosophy to paraphrase their subjects' opinions, to offer reasons why past thinkers held the opinions they did, to speculate on the premises left tacit in their arguments, and to evaluate the coherence and cogency of the inferences they drew. But the supplying of reasons for philosophical conclusions, the detection of hidden premises in philosophical arguments, and the logical evaluation of philosophical inferences are themselves

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

full-blooded philosophical activities. Consequently any serious history of philosophy must itself be an exercise in philosophy as well as in history.

On the other hand, the historian of philosophy must also have a knowledge of the historical context in which past philosophers wrote their works. When we explain historical actions, we ask for the agent's reasons; if we find a good reason, we think we have understood his action. If we conclude he did not have good reason, even in his own terms, we have to find different, more complicated explanations. What is true of action is true of taking a philosophical view. If the philosophical historian finds a good reason for a past philosopher's doctrines, his task is done. But if he concludes that the past philosopher had no good reason, he has a further and much more difficult task, of explaining the doctrine in terms of the context in which it appeared—social, perhaps, as well as intellectual.¹

History and philosophy are closely linked even in the first-hand quest for original philosophical enlightenment. In modern times this has been illustrated most brilliantly by Gottlob Frege's *Grundlagen der Arithmetik*. Almost half of Frege's book is devoted to discussing and refuting the views of other philosophers and mathematicians. While he is discussing the opinions of others, he ensures that some of his own insights are artfully insinuated, and this makes easier the eventual presentation of his own theory. But the main purpose of his lengthy historical polemic is to convince readers of the seriousness of the problems to which he will later offer solutions. Without this preamble, he says, we would lack the first prerequisite for learning anything: knowledge of our own ignorance.

Most histories of philosophy, in this age of specialization, are the work of many hands, specialists in different fields and periods. In inviting me to write, single-handed, a history of philosophy from Thales to Derrida, Oxford University Press gave expression to the belief that there is something to be gained by presenting the development of philosophy from a single viewpoint, linking ancient, medieval, early modern, and contemporary philosophy into a single narrative concerned with connected themes. The work originally appeared in four separate volumes. The first, published in 2004, covered the centuries from the beginning of philosophy up to the conversion of St Augustine in AD 387. The second, published in 2005, took the story from Augustine up to the Lateran Council of 1512. The third, published in 2006, ended with the death of Hegel in 1831. The final volume, which appeared in 2007, brought the narrative up to the final years of the second millennium. Now the whole history appears within a single binding, in four parts corresponding to the original four volumes.

The history of philosophy presented here is designed in a way that is intended to take account of the insights I have tried to express in this introduction. It is not based on any Whiggish notion that the current state of philosophy represents the

¹ The magnitude of this task was well brought out by Michael Frede in the introduction to his *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

highest point of philosophical endeavour up to the present. On the contrary, its primary assumption is that in many respects the philosophy of the great dead philosophers has not dated, and that even today one may gain great illumination by a careful reading of the great works that we have been privileged to inherit.

The kernel of any kind of history of philosophy is exegesis: the close reading and interpretation of philosophical texts. Exegesis may be of two kinds, internal or external. In internal exegesis the interpreter tries to make the text coherent and consistent, employing the principle of charity in interpretation. In external exegesis the interpreter seeks to bring out the significance of the text by comparing it and contrasting it with other texts.

Exegesis is the common basis of the two quite different historical endeavours that I described at the beginning of this introduction. In one, which we may call historical philosophy, the aim is to reach philosophical truth, or philosophical understanding, about the matter or issue under discussion in the text. Typically, historical philosophy looks for the reasons behind, or the justification for, the statements made in the text under study. In the other endeavour, the history of ideas, the aim is not to reach the truth about the matter in hand, but to reach the understanding of a person or an age or a historical succession. Typically, the historian of ideas looks not for the reasons so much as the sources, or causes, or motives, for saying what is said in the target text.

Both of these disciplines base themselves on exegesis, but, of the two, the history of ideas is the one most closely bound up with the accuracy and sensitivity of the reading of the text. It is possible to be a good philosopher while being a poor exegete. At the beginning of his *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein offers a discussion of St Augustine's theory of language. What he writes is very dubious exegesis; but this does not weaken the force of his philosophical criticism of the 'Augustinian' theory of language. But Wittgenstein did not really think of himself as engaged in historical philosophy, any more than he thought of himself as engaged in the historiography of ideas. The invocation of the great Augustine as the author of the mistaken theory is merely to indicate that the error is one that is worth attacking.

In different histories of philosophy, the skills of the historian and those of the philosopher are exercised in different proportions. The due proportion varies in accordance with the purpose of the work and the field of philosophy in question. The pursuit of historical understanding and the pursuit of philosophical enlightenment are both legitimate approaches to the history of philosophy, but both have their dangers. Historians who study the history of thought without being themselves involved in the philosophical problems that exercised past philosophers are likely to sin by superficiality. Philosophers who read ancient, medieval, or early modern texts without a knowledge of the historical context in which they were written are likely to sin by anachronism.

Each of these errors can nullify the purpose of the enterprise. The historian who is unconcerned by the philosophical problems that troubled past writers has

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

not really understood how they themselves conducted their thinking. The philosopher who ignores the historical background of past classics will gain no fresh light on the issues that concern us today, but merely present contemporary prejudices in fancy dress.

The two dangers threaten in different proportions in different areas of the history of philosophy. In the area of metaphysics it is superficiality that is most to be guarded against. To someone without a personal interest in fundamental philosophical problems the systems of the great thinkers of the past will seem only quaint lunacy. In political philosophy, anachronism is the greater danger. When we read Plato's or Aristotle's criticisms of democracy, we will not make head or tail of them unless we know something about the institutions of ancient Athens. In between metaphysics and political philosophy stand ethics and philosophy of mind: here, both dangers threaten with roughly equal force.

In this narrative I have attempted to be both a philosophical historian and a historical philosopher. Multi-authored histories are sometimes structured chronologically and sometimes structured thematically. I have combined both approaches, offering in each part first a chronological survey, and then a thematic treatment of particular philosophical topics of abiding importance. The reader whose primary interest is historical will focus on the chronological survey, referring where necessary to the thematic sections for amplification. The reader who is more concerned with the philosophical issues will concentrate rather on the thematic sections, referring back to the chronological surveys to place particular issues in context.

I should make clear at the outset that in the case of many of my historical subjects I write of necessity as an amateur rather than as an expert. In an age when the academic study of past philosophers has expanded exponentially, no one person can read more than a fraction of the vast secondary literature that has proliferated in recent years around every one of the thinkers discussed in this volume. I have myself contributed to the scholarly discussion of several of the great philosophers of the past, in particular Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Frege, and Wittgenstein, and I have published monographs on some of the subjects covered by my thematic chapters, such as the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of religion. But in compiling the bibliographies for the earlier parts I was made aware how vast was the extent of material I have not read in comparison with the amount that I am familiar with.

Any single author who attempts to cover the entire history of philosophy is quickly made aware that in matters of detail he is at an enormous disadvantage in comparison with the scholars who have made individual philosophers their field of expertise. By compensation, a history written by a single hand may be able to emphasize features of the history of philosophy that are less obvious in the works of committees of specialists, just as an aerial photograph may bring out features of a landscape that are almost invisible to those close to the ground.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The audience I have in mind is at the level of second- or third-year undergraduate study. I realize, however, that many of those interested in the history of philosophy may themselves be enrolled in courses that are not primarily philosophical. Accordingly I have done my best not to assume a familiarity with contemporary philosophical techniques or terminology. I hope also to have written in a manner clear and light-hearted enough for the book to be enjoyed by those who read it not for curricular purposes but for their own information and entertainment.

CONTENTS

<i>General Introduction</i>	ix
Part One: Ancient Philosophy	
<i>List of Contents of Part One</i>	3
<i>Introduction to Part One</i>	7
1. Beginnings: From Pythagoras to Plato	8
2. Schools of Thought: From Aristotle to Augustine	57
3. How to Argue: Logic	95
4. Knowledge and its Limits: Epistemology	118
5. How Things Happen: Physics	143
6. What There Is: Metaphysics	160
7. Soul and Mind	183
8. How to Live: Ethics	204
9. God	228
Part Two: Medieval Philosophy	
<i>List of Contents of Part Two</i>	253
<i>Introduction to Part Two</i>	257
1. Philosophy and Faith: Augustine to Maimonides	261
2. The Schoolmen: From the Twelfth Century to the Renaissance	299
3. Logic and Language	344
4. Knowledge	375
5. Physics	391
6. Metaphysics	401
7. Mind and Soul	420
8. Ethics	449
9. God	468

CONTENTS

Part Three: The Rise of Modern Philosophy

<i>List of Contents of Part Three</i>	497
<i>Introduction to Part Three</i>	501
1. Sixteenth-Century Philosophy	503
2. Descartes to Berkeley	526
3. Hume to Hegel	562
4. Knowledge	588
5. Physics	624
6. Metaphysics	636
7. Mind and Soul	659
8. Ethics	685
9. Political Philosophy	705
10. God	727

Part Four: Philosophy in the Modern World

<i>List of Contents of Part Four</i>	751
<i>Introduction to Part Four</i>	755
1. Bentham to Nietzsche	757
2. Peirce to Strawson	781
3. Freud to Derrida	810
4. Logic	829
5. Language	848
6. Epistemology	865
7. Metaphysics	884
8. Philosophy of Mind	901
9. Ethics	922
10. Aesthetics	945
11. Political Philosophy	961
12. God	977
<i>Chronology</i>	997
<i>Abbreviations and Conventions</i>	1001
<i>Bibliography</i>	1015
<i>Index</i>	1045

Detailed contents lists are placed at the beginning of each part. There are maps before the introductions of Parts One, Two, and Three.

Part One

Ancient Philosophy