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Bertrand Russell wrote a defining history of philosophy.

DOES THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY MATTER?

A new history of philosophy makes a brave attempt to fill in gaps in public knowledge, but does it pass the "wikipedia test?"

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If you study philosophy at a British or American university, your education in the history of the subject will likely be modest. Most universities teach Plato and Aristotle, skip about two millennia to Descartes, zip through the highlights of Empiricism and Rationalism to Kant, and then drop things again until the 20th Century, where Frege and Russell arise from the mists of the previous centuries' Idealism and call for a new kind of philosophy rooted in formal logic, science, and "common sense." In most of your courses, you will probably be able to do well without reading a single paper written before the 20th century.

This is peculiar because, unlike science, philosophy is not a discipline in which new theories bury the old ones. Philosophers can resurface long after we think we've disposed of them. This tendency of old ideas to rise from the dead has led to some of the most

interesting work in contemporary philosophy. The revival of virtue ethics owes much to figures such as Philippa Foot, whose re-evaluation of Plato, Aristotle and Nietzsche, helped her form a theory of normative ethics that offered an alternative to the two dominant schools, Kantian ethics and consequentialism. In epistemology, the celebrated American philosopher, Wilfrid Sellars, was deeply influenced by his close reading of Kant and Hegel. (Sellars also famously stated “philosophy without the history of philosophy is, if not blind, at least dumb.”) David Lewis’s reading of St Anselm and Leibniz led him to thinking about so-called “possible worlds;” now one can’t sit in a metaphysics seminar without talking about them.

Scholarship aimed at increasing our awareness of the history of philosophy is, in short, a good thing. That was my optimistic viewpoint as I began reading Peter Adamson’s *Classical Philosophy: a history of philosophy without any gaps*, the first instalment of a series of books aimed at producing a more comprehensive history of philosophy. A professor at King’s College London, specialising in ancient and Arabic philosophy, Adamson laments the spotty education most students receive in the history of philosophy: “My goal in this series of books, then, is to tell the whole history of philosophy in an entertaining but not overly-simplified way,” he writes.

From these laudable beginnings, things soon start to go downhill. This book began life as a podcast, which might explain the presence of sentences like “Some listeners might be suspicious of the points I’ve been making this chapter.” It might also explain the constant repetitions, which are presumably aimed at those who missed a crucial detail: “I have already mentioned,” “As we discussed already,” “As I mentioned earlier.” There are also regular announcements of what’s to come: “Parmenides, as we’ll see, thought that unity is all there is,” and then one page later “He thinks this, as we’ll see” and, exactly one paragraph later, “as we’ll see” Plato also has something to say about matters.

The puns are also a problem. Once Adamson has spotted a pun in the distance, he will hunt it down and pry it from whatever linguistic comforts it may have once enjoyed. At one point, he offers a caveat: “If you’ll pardon the pun. (If you won’t pardon the pun, this book may not be for you).” Such warnings are similar to a nun cautioning that she is going to strike you with a ruler; it only makes the pain worse. We can never prepare ourselves for “like a giraffe, Parmenides seems to be sticking his neck out too far.”


Painful prose, though rarely this wantonly sadistic, is something we are accustomed to suffer in philosophy. The better the philosopher, the greater allowance we give them to torture the language. The problem for Adamson's book is that the quality of the philosophy does not excuse the deficiencies of the prose. If a chapter of a book like this is less comprehensive and less interesting than its corresponding Wikipedia article, then it is time to worry.

The chapter on Plato's *Theaetetus*, Adamson's personal favourite, comes perilously close to crumbling under the Wikipedia test. The *Theaetetus* is a somber, beautiful dialogue which contains some of Plato's most striking images and metaphors. In the dialogue, Socrates engages a young man in pursuit of a definition of knowledge. Three definitions are offered, and rejected: knowledge as perception, knowledge as true belief/judgement, and knowledge as true belief/judgement plus logos (which means something like an account for why the true belief is true). Adamson has the upper hand over Wikipedia in covering Plato's wax-tablet analogy and its relation to the topic of false belief, but Wikipedia goes into more detail about the caged-bird metaphor of mind (the human mind as a cage and birds as its contents) and outlines the distinction Socrates draws between having and possessing. Adamson looks as if he may best Wikipedia on one of Plato's most enduring arguments—the argument that to say “All truths are relative” is a contradiction or self-defeating—but decides that “before we get any dizzier” we should leave the topic behind. Wikipedia maintains the stamina to devote six paragraphs to the most difficult passages of the dialogue: the transition from the discussion of a jury which, under the influence of sophistry, arrives at a true belief without having reasoned their own way to it, to *Theaetetus*' revised proposal of knowledge as true belief plus logos. This is the moment for a philosopher to show his worth in comparison to the Wikipedia hive-mind. Adamson devotes one paragraph to the issue, and a sad little footnote announces “I will here pass over the final, difficult section of the dialogue...”

A more complete account of the history of philosophy is a noble goal. But it also puts more pressure on Adamson to explain his omissions. Hippocrates finds a place in Classical Philosophy because “medicine and philosophy in the Greek world went hand-in-hand.” Herodotus and Thucydides, who are widely regarded as the forefathers of the philosophy of history, war and politics, are left out. These omissions are to be expected in traditional histories that depend on brevity. But when the point of your book is a history without gaps, it is fatal to include some figures peripherally associated with philosophy and exclude others without explanation.

It's instructive to compare Classical Philosophy, with all its failings, to a book that owns up to its gaps, such as Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*. Haughty, narrow-minded, and ideological to a fault, the book is a masterpiece. Russell's disdain for armchair philosophy and his fondness of empiricism made him blind to many of Plato's deepest insights, a poor interpreter of Kant, and abusive towards Hegel. But it's impossible not to marvel at his knowledge, wit and intelligence. The book begins like this: "Many histories of philosophy exist, and it has not been my purpose merely to add one to their number." Russell never professes to write a complete history of philosophy (though he does an admirable job recounting Roman and medieval philosophy). What he does is something far better; he interprets the canon of philosophy in a way that is coherent, articulate and highly personal. His treatment of the Theaetetus contains an analysis of existential propositions and how they are related to the entities we are committed to saying are ultimately part of reality (this certainly passes the Wikipedia test). For the Cynics and Sceptics of ancient Greece and Rome—with whom he has little affinity—Russell offers his sympathy for their despair at living in a society where philosophy is seen as useless in politics and culture, a sentiment more familiar to us than to Russell. "They still think, because they cannot help thinking," writes Russell, "but they scarcely hope that their thought will bear fruit in the world of affairs."

It is Russell's ability to reach back through the ages and treat his predecessors as peers—to resurrect the complexity and nuance of their arguments and evaluate them rigorously—that makes his history enduring. It is a quality that makes Bernard Williams' *Descartes* remain one of the most insightful books on that philosopher. In fact, all of the best work in the history of philosophy shares the virtue of treating historical texts as interesting only to the extent that they are philosophically compelling: Stuart Hampshire's *Spinoza*, PF Strawson's *Bounds of Sense*, the scholarship of Anthony Kenny, Myles Burnyeat, Gregory Vlastos, to name a few.

Histories of ideas requires an uneasy balancing of competing obligations; between insight and accuracy, between being charitable and being critical, between breadth of scope and depth of vision. It is a difficult form to master. As Adamson tells us, "no one said this history-of-philosophy business was going to be busy." 

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