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Can nature make us happy? How can we know anything? What is justice? Why is there evil in the world? What is the source of truth? Is it possible for God not to exist? Can we really believe what we see? There are questions that have intrigued the world's great thinkers over the ages, which still touch a chord in all of us today. They are questions that can teach us about the way we live, work, relate to each other and see the world. Here Leszek Kołakowski explores the essence of these ideas, introducing figures from Socrates to Thomas Aquinas, Descartes to Nietzsche, and concentrating on one single important philosophical question from each of them. Whether reflecting on good and evil, truth and beauty, faith and the soul, or free will and consciousness, Leszek Kołakowski shows that these timeless ideas remain at the very core of our existence.

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Will says

A tiny pocket-sized thing that can be breezed through in a sitting or two. It's mostly paraphrase, not so much insight-driven. Unfortunately, this isn't even the full translation of Kołakowski's Polish book. It leaves out chapters on Aristotle (!), Meister Eckhart, Nicolas of Cusa, Hobbes (!), Heidegger (!), Jaspers and Plotinus. The translator blames this on the request of the American publisher (Basic Books), and it's baffling to me why 23 questions is preferable to an even 30.

Josie says

A birthday gift, & a beautifully-written tour through the central questions raised by some of the most important figures in Western European thought. (Sadly, the author had not, at the time of writing, got his head around Wittgenstein, who is omitted.) Kołakowski treats each philosopher with great respect - though, admittedly, some more than others (his handling of Nietzsche in particular can verge on the testily paternal); but the book is not without problems.

Firstly, the 'great philosophers' are solely men: there is no de Beauvoir, which is, to me, a glaring omission given her contributions to political philosophy; secondly, there is a slant towards the Christian/deist side of things: the author selects Jaspers over Sartre, which, given the latter's vast influence on 20th century thought, seems rather at odds with the book's stated purpose - though perhaps not surprising when one considers Kołakowski's ideological opposition to Marxism.

But, when all's said and done, half the fun of philosophy is in the critique! And I certainly know far more about Pascal than perhaps I ever would have done. It's a lovely weekend read, for those of us that like to get cosy with the history of thought.

Joux says

Wasn't what I was looking for as the underlying frame of thought evident throughout the book was towards God. So in that sense it is great. It does have a good chronological structure and organization, with a historical summary and highlights at the start and questions at the back. Whilst the language is impeccable, I lost the train of thought many times as it became lengthy when it seems like the purpose of the book is to be bite-sized and readable chapter by chapter. Some chapters (Ockham, Schoenhauer, Heidegger) were better than others in that sense. The good thing is that I can now shelve it and use it as a reference.

Maria Borland says

This could almost be the outline for a module on God in the history of European philosophy. Kolakowski states in his introduction that 'If a student attempted to sit an exam based on these essays, he would be

disappointed'. This is true, each brief chapter acts as a lesson that requires you to have done or to go out and do the extra reading. I have a feeling it is a book better read slowly. Each section concludes with several open ended questions that you could easily imagine facilitating a seminar discussion. As you would expect from the title, it is the big questions - is there a God? What is being? - that we are concerned with. It is left to the reader to go back to the original text and search out the details. These questions inevitably concern the nature and purpose of philosophy, and if there indeed is one. The circularity of some of these pervading questions is reflected in the chronology which takes us from Socrates to Jaspers then back to Plotinus. Kolakowski has an amusingly abrupt style: 'So I stick to my choice – it is what it is, and I will not argue about it', 'It won't (they might say) [...] But this would be a very silly objection.'

A book that reminds you about all those other books you should have read.

James says

This is a small book both in number of pages and height - it is only six and a quarter inches tall. But within this small frame Leszek Kolakowski packs a lot of philosophy. It is organized by philosopher from ancient to modern and for each section of about ten pages the book focuses upon one key idea associated with the philosopher being discussed. As Kolakowski says in the introduction: "I do not intend to 'summarize' Plato, Descartes or Husserl: that would be an absurd ambition." [at least within the confines of a small volume like this] "I would like, rather, to approach these great philosophers by concentrating on one idea in the thought of each--an important idea, an idea that was fundamental to his philosophical construction, but also one that we can still understand today; an idea that touches a chord in us, rather than being simply a bit of historical information."

Because of this approach and his deep understanding of the philosophers presented the book is valuable as a catalyst for the thought of the reader, whether one has read deeply in philosophy or not. The fundamental questions raised may spur further reading and thought about these issues. One disappointment is the lack of a bibliography, but there are references in the text to specific works of philosophers which can be used to search out further texts for reading. Those who are already familiar with the works of these thinkers will find this book a refreshing challenge to remember and rethink some key ideas.

Mike Lindgren says

Professor Kolakowski has written a superb little book here, both dense and lucid, a kind of personal, idiosyncratic summary of the central ideas of 23 great philosophers from Socrates to Husserl. It's fairly dry, dealing tersely with a lot of demanding, abstract ideas, so it makes me feel dumb (in a good way), but it's so short that it can be read in an afternoon or so, in snatches. Its operation on me is to spark a yearning for an extra lifetime or two where I could devote hours upon hours to reading the great thinkers, in the original texts, which is kind of a dubious blessing. What I like about the book, though, is that it vividly conveys the *idea* of philosophy, in a very compressed way; it's like an espresso shot of intellect.

Christian Schwoerke says

Despite Kolakowski's demurrals, this is a summary account of Western philosophy, and it's an interesting and engaging ride, though one that required me to make notes as I read. Each of the thirty philosophers in the

Penguin edition of this book (apparently only 23 in the Basic Books edition) is unique in his perspective, but sometimes only slightly different from some predecessor (or follower). Notes were also helpful in trying to separate out a philosopher's terms and concepts, as there is a good deal of metaphysical matter to absorb, which doesn't have much obvious basis in quotidian down-to-earth realities. Kolakowski intermingles biographical and historical context with each philosopher's main thoughts on the ultimate/underlying nature of God/reality. He overtly raises questions of each philosopher at the end of chapters in order to test either the premise or conclusions of his thought. Some of these questions seemed to me to be beside the point, as I raised other questions instead, which I thought more relevant. I think this might have been Kolakowski's intent.

Malli says

A magnificent, guided tour through Western Philosophy. Starting with Socrates, this tour goes through Parmenides, Heraclitus, Plato, Epictetus, Empericus, St Augustine, St Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, William of Occam, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Pascal, Locke, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Bergson and Husserl. Each philosopher's core thought is described in just a few pages. I personally, for the first time, got the essence of most of the 23 philosophers except Spinoza, Kant, Bergson and Husserl. A third / fourth reading might help which I shall do later. Not bad given the density with which knowledge has been packed in just 200 pages. Thoroughly enjoyed it.

Bill Kerwin says

To those of you who loved philosophy in college, but are fearful of re-kindling such a demanding relationship, I would recommend this little book. It is commitment-free afternoon of philosophical dalliance. This is no candle-lit dinner; this is an early lunch at a well-lighted cafe.

Leszek Kolakowski—a real philosopher known both for his works on Marxism and his works on religious belief—poses twenty-three questions crucial to the thought of twenty-three different philosophers from Socrates to Husserl. The questions range from the metaphysical (Parmenides: “What is real?”), through the moral (St. Augustine: “What is evil?”) the epistemological (Kant: “How is knowledge possible?”), the existential (Schopenhauer: “Should we commit suicide?”), the religious (Kierkegaard: “Do we need the Church?”), and the evolutionary humanist (Bergson: “What is the human spirit?”)—and a lot of other issues in between. Each question is treated succinctly in a brief essay of approximately ten pages, and by the time you have reached the end of this chronologically organized book, you will feel as if you have taken a brief tour of all of Western philosophy.

Don't misunderstand me, though. This tour may be brief, but it is not superficial. The essays are densely reasoned, filled with insights and challenging questions, but since each is a mere ten pages in length, I think you will find them—as I did—attractive rather than intimidating. (I would, however, recommend that you read not more than two or three at a time. This “early lunch at a well-lighted cafe” may take you two or three weeks to consume.)

If you ever loved philosophy, you will enjoy this book. It definitely rekindled my passion. Who knows? I might even give *The Critique of Pure Reason* another try.

Nick says

A very clearly argued, cleanly written explication of many of the great philosophers, beginning with Socrates and ending with Husserl. Kolakowski doesn't try to explain each philosopher's entire program, rather he provides a window into one or two questions he thinks are both interesting and representative. The result is rather like an elegant Cliff Notes for intellectuals who can't be bothered to sweat it out with the originals but want a sense of what they were saying. I would recommend this book as a way to try out various philosophical systems -- and then dig deeper into the ones that seem most interesting. It won't satisfy someone who wants to truly investigate, say, Hegel, but it is a very smart start.

Jon says

A wonderfully clear short introduction to 23 philosophers and 23 philosophical questions, none of which have been answered to universal satisfaction. Not an introduction to philosophy (the author says a student who tries to sit an exam based only on reading this book will fail) nor a full account of any of the philosophers. More an introduction to ways of thinking about philosophical questions. Translated from the Polish, and therefore even more astonishing that it is so clear even I can follow the arguments. My only complaint is that originally there were 30 questions, but the publisher insisted on cutting back for reasons of space. Phooey.

Thomas says

A great summary of the pillars of Western philosophy. Summary is the key word, though. I was misled when I picked it up: I thought each chapter was a selection from the actual philosopher himself (yup, all men). It's actually Kolakowski's summation of their central argument. That's fine enough, and he was coherent enough to keep me reading, though a bit routine in his approach to each fella.

It's quite a lot of heady thought to digest at once. I had major metaphysical fatigue about two-thirds through. And it's equally hopeful and disheartening — the former because the sheer volume of writing and hours of thought on these subjects is such worthwhile effort, but the latter because so much of it is contradictory and, after all these centuries of navel-gazing, we still have no idea what the hell we're doing here. But the answer to life, the universe and everything is subjective as well as objective, so it's time well spent to think on these things with your own brain. And soul. If there is one. Sigh.

Mark says

Besides the fact this is a small book that can easily fit in a shirt pocket, the biggest reason I like it is that it names the biggest positive conclusions in the development of philosophy, and without saying 'this is reality' it leaves you with the most asked questions which remain about the conclusions drawn by those various

philosophers which it covers. I would have liked it had they included Bertrand Russell and Sartre, maybe also Voltaire, rather than just raising their specters in relation to others without going into more details. But it does in fact, hit some of the biggest questions about our human condition, as people have attempted to define it over the historical period.

Burak Uzun says

Kolakowski; Sokrates'ten Platon'a, Descartes'tan Hobbes'a, Schopenhauer'a, Heidegger'a, 30 dü?ünür hakk?nda denemeler yazm???. Her bir denemede, bahsedece?i dü?ünürün insanl??a yöneltti?i sorulardan hareketle bir yolculu?a ç?km?? ve bu yolculu?u sorularla devam ettirmi?.

Yaln?z kendisi, "Bu denemeleri neden yazd?m?" bölümünde kitab?n bir hap bilgiler toplam?, bir özetleme çabas? ya da ders kitab? olmad??n? belirtmi?.

Anlad??m kadar?yla -hissetti?im demeliyim belki de- dü?ünü?ler aras? bir yolculuk iste?i do?urmu? bu kitab?.

Aç?kças?, çok fazla felsefi metinleri takip edemeyen ama dü?ün yo?unlu?unu seven bir okur olarak çok be?endim.

Abbi Dion says

I really enjoyed this. The author's tone is really humble yet morally intelligent. Basically this volume serves as a nice primer and/or refresher of some of the wackos born to this here earth. Sadly, the English edition doesn't include sections on Aristotle, Heidegger, or Jaspers. If you can read the original Polish edition, you will be able to enjoy them, however. Favorite passage: "Kierkegaard's view of the relation between the world and eternity emerges from his remarks about the sign of the Apocalypse. A fire breaks out in a theater, but it so happens that it is Pierrot the clown who has to announce the fact to the audience. Of course, no one believes him; everyone thinks it is just a joke, and they go on laughing until they are consumed by the flames. That, says Kierkegaard, is how the end of the world will come: in the midst of general hilarity." - Leszek Kolakowski
