

Ideas of the Great Philosophers

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If you never understood why Plato's philosophy of Ideal Forms is called Realism, Ideas of the Great Philosophers makes ideal reading. This compact book provides a veritable brief history of philosophy, offering precise descriptions of the major branches of philosophical thought and exploring the contributions of great thinkers to the various fields of philosophic inquiry.

Ideas of the Great Philosophers Details

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Bethany says

This was informative. I'm sad to admit I knew so little about philosophy, formally. I have a masters degree and I couldn't name a third of the philosophers described in this book. A very good sampling of philosophy for the novice.

Bob Nichols says

This book outlines the major categories of philosophical thought—epistemology, ethics and philosophy of life, social and political philosophy, religion, and metaphysics. The book closes by summarizing several distinct philosophical schools. Though helpful as an outline, there are multiple things wrong with this book.

The authors stick a philosophy flag at the top of the knowledge hierarchy and bat away the challengers. A scientist “merely” describes, whereas a philosopher “evaluates all the facts of experience known to man.” That’s an odd way to put it as science comes with a point of view about the nature of reality and truth, with built-in evaluation standards. Scientists probe great questions too. Robert Jastrow, for example, writes in his Preface to “Red Giants and White Dwarfs” (1967), “The scientific story of creation touches on the central problems of man’s existence: What am I? How did I get here? What is my relation to the rest of the Universe? The ideas are simple and beautiful...” And more than a few scientists have their own (evaluative and unflattering) point of view about the philosophy. Darwin, for example, said something like, “He who understands baboons would do more towards metaphysics than Locke.”

In their breakdown of various epistemological categories, the authors refer to the Fallacy of Ambiguity (hiding behind words). There’s an irony as this is what the authors do here and there. They are not always straight shooters. Of Socrates, they write that “a man who truly knows himself will succeed,” but fail to tell us that “success” has nothing to do with success as we typically think about this word. They refer to a “rational psychology” that is opposed to “scientific empirical psychology,” without saying what, exactly, “rational” psychology might be. When the authors write that “philosophers distinguish between phenomenal existence (the object as it appears to the senses) and metaphysical reality (the object as it truly or ultimately is),” they pre-set the table as to what is and what is not real.

It’s more of the same when it comes to the philosophy of religion where they, philosophically, take the question of God’s existence off the table. The primary question is not that, they say, or the “conflict between Theism and Atheism.” Rather, “the basic problem has to do with the nature of God” and the “the significance of the term God.” They say that God exists, but it is whatever is meaningful in one’s life. They say that “the alcoholic’s God might be the liquor upon which he depends for security; that the God of others might be the sciences in which they put their unshakable faith.” In the context of what they say elsewhere about science the expression “unshakable faith” raises a red flag. The authors also state that “usually when people debate concerning God’s existence they refer to a Theistic God” which puts God’s existence as a Theistic Being right back on the table as a valid area for philosophical and scientific inquiry. Finally, the authors state that the question of “Who made God?” has no logical validity. It is analogous to the question, “Have you stopped beating your wife?” in which either answer, Yes or No, is self-incriminating.” I didn’t understand the authors’ objection to the "Who made God" question.

A few miscellaneous thoughts: I like how the authors characterize Plato's thought in the following statement: "God...is impersonal, a system of ideal values worthy of worship—eternal Platonic ideals of justice, beauty, truth, and goodness. These ideas are worshipped, in contrast to Theism which worships God as the source of them." Yet, as Plato's eternal Forms also create the world, it's not clear how this aspect is different than a Theistic creator and it's curious that the word "worship" is used. When the authors summarize Plato's social and political theory, they also strip away his cosmology which might put an entirely different interpretation on what Plato has to say (i.e., to prepare "man" for divine perfection and existence). The authors' statement on Kant that "The attempt to carry on a society, an institution, or a business, on an immoral basis will never prove successful on any lasting basis," turns Kant into a utilitarian. They also write that "Kant relegated metaphysics to the area which transcends human experience, hence is beyond the reach of legitimate knowledge. The area of metaphysics was for him the realm of the unknowable, leaving the phenomenal world as the only genuinely knowable. He argued that valid knowledge cannot be gained concerning God, soul, immortality, etc." Here they turn Kant into a materialist, which he is not, unless the Fallacy of Ambiguity is at work here. The authors turn Nietzsche into a sort of a Christian when they write that "In spirit he is like Jesus on the cross, asking God to forgive his enemies." The distinction between religion and philosophy is blurry.* An argument can be made that Plato, for example, blended the two. There's little in this philosophical survey about the role of naturalism; biologists for example might argue that there's no such thing as a "mind-body" problem. Finally, the philosophers and philosophies covered are all Western. That's a problem in a round world. Isn't there a philosophy in the Upanishads, in Confucianism, in Lao Tzu, and in the philosophies of the Islamic scholars who rescued Greek thought from oblivion?

*William Sahakian's also worked as a pastor, which might explain some of the way he characterizes religious philosophy.

Marcos says

Boring.

Bjm Index says

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Olatomiwa Bifarin says

A confluence of philosophies, I loved it.

ej cullen says

Excellent little book

M.R. Graham says

Nice, brief overview. Very little detail, but it's useful to be able to see the major tenets of each school laid out side-by-side.

Matthew says

Exactly the kind of summary of the history of Western philosophic thought up until about the middle of the 20th century that most people could get through quickly and rather painlessly. Organized a little like a textbook, which makes it a good reference book as well. An excellent Western Philosophy 101 course.

Peter Klok says

Never could find this authors other books.

Damien says

One of the worst "introductory" Philosophy texts I have yet come across. It assumes working familiarity with philosophical jargon not to be found in many dictionaries. Come on, is "adequation" a word you really expect "lay" readers to know? And the overwrought translations of German with strings-of-hyphenated words? Really? Again, if you're well-versed in philosophy, this is typical and to be expected. But this is, as far as I can tell, meant to be introductory. Epistemology is my favorite branch of philosophy. I find it meaty, engaging, fun to wrangle with, but this introduction to Epistemology, found in Section One, makes it sound like the most technical, dry, esoteric, (and hence, remote, and "meaningless") discipline one could possibly imagine. UGH.

Oh, and the writing is -unbelievably- patronizing. I realize it's from the 60s and writing 50 years old will necessarily have a different style, but I'm left to wonder if it is this very style that is the reason why the "man on the street," a phrase used in this book with a dismissive "sniff," thinks philosophers are fools – people incapable of engaging real life and lost in meaningless trivialities. It's sad, truly. Philosophy supports and broadens the meaningful life!!!
