

Introduction

There have always been parts of philosophy which have been highly technical and so abstruse that only specialists could understand them. These features have their own importance, but the title of this book is intended to show that it concerns itself mainly with those aspects of philosophy that have influenced people's attitudes towards their lives, towards each other and their society, towards their Gods, and towards the ethical problems that confront them.

I am a historian by profession; I have taught history as a main subject, initially to sixth formers and now to retired people. I should describe myself as an amateur rather than a professional philosopher (as specialists in the subject may swiftly discover) but I have always taught philosophy as an important component of history. Although I have of course grappled with history's technical matters as well as with the wider issues, it is the latter which have always interested me most, and it is not surprising that my classes have also shown the greatest interest in those aspects which touch on contemporary concerns. The students have not always immediately seen the relevance to contemporary issues of problems raised by philosophers in the past. So I have found that it has been helpful for me to have specifically raised this relevance.

This book is the result of that experience. I have selected mainly those aspects of the history of ideas which have something to say to our present preoccupations; and I have proceeded, as I do in my classes, in a chronological fashion. I am interested in all those figures who, in the past, have contributed to shape the thought of their time and of later ages; and I do not draw the sharp distinction that professionals do between philosophers, theologians, scientists, psychologists and even political propagandists. I set out to expound the ideas of a particular thinker; I then invite discussion of the material and especially of how it relates to issues that are still alive today. Over the last five years I have tape-recorded these discussions, and a special feature of this book is that my student's reflections and mine – set in from the margin and in a different type – interrupt the exposition.

Another feature of the book are the many footnotes which refer the reader back to earlier, and forward to later, pages of the book. They are intended to serve the dual purpose of making the references easier to look up and to reinforce the idea that throughout the centuries philosophers have often grappled with the same problems, sometimes coming up with similar approaches and sometimes with radically different ones.

At the same time I have assumed that many readers will not be reading the book from cover to cover, but may read chapters in isolation. This accounts for the occasional repetition of arguments that I hope will not irritate unduly those who read the complete book in a relatively short time.

The topics I have chosen are selective, and the book does not purport to give a comprehensive account of the thinkers with whom I deal.

As a historian, I am well aware that it is dangerous to read present concerns into an interpretation of the past. I dare say that the same danger exists in philosophy: perhaps the thinkers of the past, were they alive today, would be puzzled by what I may have occasionally read into them. But philosophers, like other figures from the past, have no control over the effect their thoughts and actions have in later years. The historian must be interested not only in what an idea meant to a character in the past, but also in how that idea has been interpreted by later generations. I try to be fair to the original context of an idea, but I must admit that what fascinates me most is the potency of some ideas down the ages. If I have unwittingly falsified the former, I must crave the indulgence of the professional philosophers and theologians.

Acknowledgments

Much of this book is based on notes I have made on my reading over several decades, long before I had the idea that I might be writing a book. Although I have a comprehensive list of the books I have read (they are all on my shelves), it never occurred to me to include page references in my notes. I may occasionally have copied phrases or incorporated lines of arguments that came from these books, but it is impossible now to track all of these down. The bibliography at the end of this volume shows the range of authors to whom I have been indebted. If any of them feel that here and there parts of my text are very close to what they have written, I would apologize for any plagiarism they may suspect and ask them to accept that it was wholly unintentional.

I am very grateful to my editor, Keith Sutherland, for the encouragement he has given me throughout, and to Sandra Good and Bryn Williams for their meticulous proof-reading. In addition Bryn Williams has made many substantive comments that have caused me to make numerous changes to my text. Professional and specialist philosophers will undoubtedly find mistakes in this work of an amateur author. For these I must, of course, take full responsibility.

The other debt I am only too glad to acknowledge is to my classes at the University of the Third Age in London. Several of them had asked me to write such a book. Without the incorporation of their comments and the questions they have raised, this volume would have been very much shorter and much of its flavour would have been lost. It is to my students, therefore, that I dedicate the result.

Parts of chapters 13, 27 and 31 first appeared in the quarterly journal *Philosophy Now*: "Free Will and Predestination" in issue No.20 (Spring 1998); "Aesthetics and Absolutes" in issue No. 3 (Spring 1992); and "Kant and the Thing in Itself" in issue No. 31 (Spring, 2001).