



On Philosophy

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On Philosophy

Good Book Guide 8 (Spring 1980), 10



René Descartes, 'the father of modern philosophy' (C17th engraving)

‘PHILOSOPHY’ is a very general term. It has been used with many meanings, vague and precise, since its first beginnings among the Greeks. It has been described as ‘the contemplation of all life and all existence’,¹ as ‘the soul speaking to itself’² and, by an Austrian satirist of our own time, as ‘the systematic misuse of a terminology

¹ Untraced.

² ‘Thought is the (silent) conversation of the soul with itself’: Plato, *Sophist* 263e–264a. ‘Silent’ occurs only in the first of two statements of this definition in this passage. Cf. *Theaetetus* 189e.

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invented for the purpose',³ but such epigrams do not convey its essence.

If one had to summarise what it has meant in the West, in particular during the last four hundred years, it has mainly consisted in the critical examination of the most general categories and concepts embedded in men's thought and action, such as *true* and *false*, *good* and *bad*, *same* and *different*, *things* and *persons*. One of its most important tasks has been to elicit the presuppositions of the central and most lasting beliefs of human societies – in the West, naturally enough, of Western society – and the attempt to assess their validity by the use of rational methods; sometimes the assessment of those rational methods themselves by appeals to other sources of knowledge.

The most frequent questions asked in this connection are 'How do you know?' and 'What does this mean?', as well as the older metaphysical query, 'What is really there and what is mere appearance?' These questions can be, and have been, asked in every province of human thought and action, and this is the sense in which philosophy is the most general enquiry there is.

Since Descartes, philosophers have developed a technical terminology which sometimes discourages even the most intelligent among those who wish to know what it is that philosophers do. The best way to find out is, of course, to learn how to do it by reading or listening to experts. But there are among the best known philosophical works a good many which are written in language so close to ordinary speech, so clear and penetrating, that they can be recommended enthusiastically to anyone who is genuinely interested in finding out what philosophers talk about and why. I have not selected the most influential or important philosophical works so much as works of the first order and importance, which have until now stood the test of time, and are such as an intelligent and educated reader could understand and enjoy.

I could of course, have included such major works as Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Politics*, Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, Kant's *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Mill's *Utilitarianism*, James's *Pragmatism* or *The Will to Believe*, Russell's *Power*, Bergson's *The Creative Mind*, Freud's *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* or *The*

³ Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (London, 1964), 89 (given as an example of an epigram, whose authorship is not made explicit).

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Psychopathology of Everyday Life, *The Future of an Illusion* etc., Ayer's *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge*, Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, but this would have made the list unduly long. I feel moderately sure that those who read half a dozen of the selected works and find themselves interested will inevitably wish to continue.

IB'S SELECTION

Plato, *Phaedo*

Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*

Machiavelli, *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy*

Montaigne, *Essays*

Descartes, *Discourse on Method* and *Meditations on First Philosophy*

Hobbes, *Leviathan*

Pascal, *Pensées*

Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*

Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*

Rousseau, *The Discourses*

Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*

Mill, *On Liberty*

Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*

James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*

Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*

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