

A NEW HISTORY OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

VOLUME I

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*Ancient Philosophy*

ANTHONY  
KENNY

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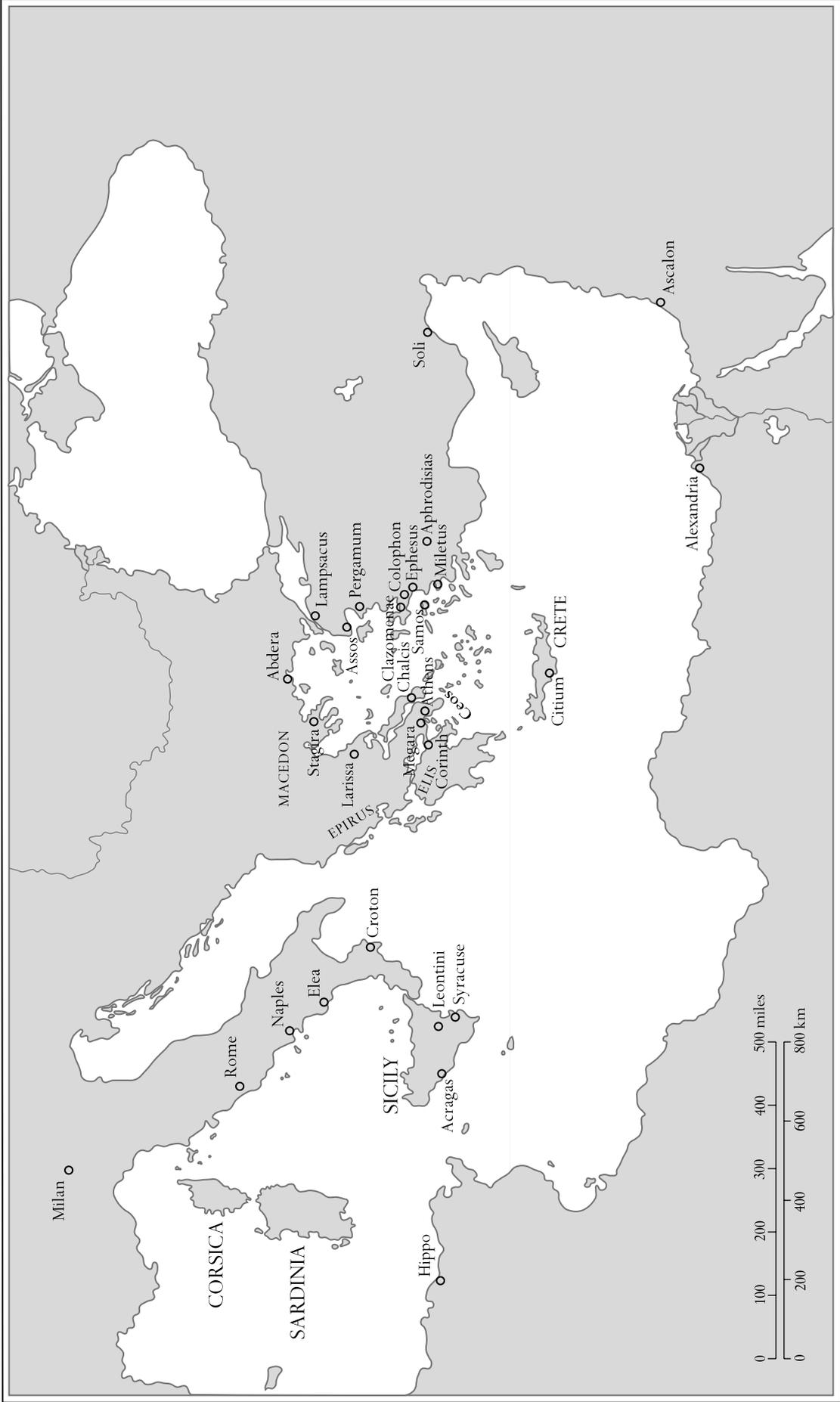
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## INTRODUCTION

Why should one study the history of philosophy? There are many reasons, but they fall into two groups: philosophical and historical. We may study the great dead philosophers in order to seek illumination upon themes of present-day philosophical inquiry. Or we may wish to understand the people and societies of the past, and read their philosophy to grasp the conceptual climate in which they thought and acted. We may read the philosophers of other ages to help to resolve philosophical problems of abiding concern, or to enter more fully into the intellectual world of a bygone era.

In this history of philosophy, from the beginnings to the present day, I hope to further both purposes, but in different ways in different parts of the work, as I shall try to make clear in this Introduction. But before outlining a strategy for writing the history of philosophy, one must pause to reflect on the nature of philosophy itself. The word ‘philosophy’ means different things in different mouths, and correspondingly ‘the history of philosophy’ can be interpreted in many ways. What it signifies depends on what the particular historian regards as being essential to philosophy.

This was true of Aristotle, who was philosophy’s first historian, and of Hegel, who hoped he would be its last, since he was bringing philosophy to perfection. The two of them had very different views of the nature of philosophy. Nonetheless, they had in common a view of philosophical progress: philosophical problems in the course of history became ever more clearly defined, and they could be answered with ever greater accuracy. Aristotle in the first book of his *Metaphysics* and Hegel in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* saw the teachings of the earlier philosophers they recorded as halting steps in the direction of a vision they were themselves to expound.

Only someone with supreme self-confidence as a philosopher could write its history in such a way. The temptation for most philosopher historians is to see philosophy not as culminating in their own work, but rather as a gradual progress to whatever philosophical system is currently

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in fashion. But this temptation should be resisted. There is no force that guarantees philosophical progress in any particular direction.

Indeed, it can be called into question whether philosophy makes any progress at all. The major philosophical problems, some say, are all still being debated after centuries of discussion, and are no nearer to any definitive resolution. In the twentieth century the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote:

You always hear people say that philosophy makes no progress and that the same philosophical problems which were already preoccupying the Greeks are still troubling us today. But people who say that do not understand the reason why it has to be so. The reason is that our language has remained the same and always introduces us to the same questions. . . . I read ‘philosophers are no nearer to the meaning of “reality” than Plato got’. What an extraordinary thing! How remarkable that Plato could get so far! Or that we have not been able to get any further! Was it because Plato was *so* clever? (MS 213/424)

The difference between what we might call the Aristotelian and the Wittgensteinian attitude to progress in philosophy is linked with two different views of philosophy itself. Philosophy may be viewed as a science, on the one hand, or as an art, on the other. Philosophy is, indeed, uniquely difficult to classify, and resembles both the arts and the sciences.

On the one hand, philosophy seems to be like a science in that the philosopher is in pursuit of truth. Discoveries, it seems, are made in philosophy, and so the philosopher, like the scientist, has the excitement of belonging to an ongoing, cooperative, cumulative intellectual venture. If so, the philosopher must be familiar with current writing, and keep abreast of the state of the art. On this view, we twenty-first-century philosophers have an advantage over earlier practitioners of the discipline. We stand, no doubt, on the shoulders of other and greater philosophers, but we do stand above them. We have superannuated Plato and Kant.

On the other hand, in the arts, classic works do not date. If we want to learn physics or chemistry, as opposed to their history, we don’t nowadays read Newton or Faraday. But we read the literature of Homer and Shakespeare not merely to learn about the quaint things that passed through people’s minds in far-off days of long ago. Surely, it may well be argued, the same is true of philosophy. It is not merely in a spirit of antiquarian curiosity that we read Aristotle today. Philosophy is essentially the work

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of individual genius, and Kant does not supersede Plato any more than Shakespeare supersedes Homer.

There is truth in each of these accounts, but neither is wholly true and neither contains the whole truth. Philosophy is not a science, and there is no state of the art in philosophy. Philosophy is not a matter of expanding knowledge, of acquiring new truths about the world; the philosopher is not in possession of information that is denied to others. Philosophy is not a matter of knowledge, it is a matter of understanding, that is to say, of organizing what is known. But because philosophy is all-embracing, is so universal in its field, the organization of knowledge it demands is something so difficult that only genius can do it. For all of us who are not geniuses, the only way in which we can hope to come to grips with philosophy is by reaching up to the mind of some great philosopher of the past.

Though philosophy is not a science, throughout its history it has had an intimate relation to the sciences. Many disciplines that in antiquity and in the Middle Ages were part of philosophy have long since become independent sciences. A discipline remains philosophical as long as its concepts are unclarified and its methods are controversial. Perhaps no scientific concepts are ever fully clarified, and no scientific methods are ever totally uncontroversial; if so, there is always a philosophical element left in every science. But once problems can be unproblematically stated, when concepts are uncontroversially standardized, and where a consensus emerges for the methodology of solution, then we have a science setting up home independently, rather than a branch of philosophy.

Philosophy, once called the queen of the sciences, and once called their handmaid, is perhaps better thought of as the womb, or the midwife, of the sciences. But in fact sciences emerge from philosophy not so much by parturition as by fission. Two examples, out of many, may serve to illustrate this.

In the seventeenth century philosophers were much exercised by the problem which of our ideas are innate and which are acquired. This problem split into two problems, one psychological ('What do we owe to heredity and what do we owe to environment?') and one belonging to the theory of knowledge ('How much of our knowledge depends on experience and how much is independent of it?'). The first question was handed over to scientific psychology, the second question remained philosophical.

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But the second question itself split into a number of questions, one of which was ‘Is mathematics merely an extension of logic, or is it an independent body of truth?’ The question whether mathematics could be derived from pure logic was given a precise answer by the work of logicians and mathematicians in the twentieth century. The answer was not philosophical, but mathematical. So here we had an initial, confused, philosophical question which ramified in two directions—towards psychology and towards mathematics. There remains in the middle a philosophical residue to be churned over, concerning the nature of mathematical propositions.

An earlier example is more complicated. A branch of philosophy given an honoured place by Aristotle is ‘theology’. When today we read what he says, the discipline appears a mixture of astronomy and philosophy of religion. Christian and Muslim Aristotelians added to it elements drawn from the teaching of their sacred books. It was when St Thomas Aquinas, in the thirteenth century, drew a sharp distinction between natural and revealed theology that the first important fission took place, removing from the philosophical agenda the appeals to revelation. It took rather longer for the astronomy and the natural theology to separate out from each other. This example shows that what may be sloughed off by philosophy need not be a science but may be a humanistic discipline such as biblical studies. It also shows that the history of philosophy contains examples of fusion as well as of fission.

Philosophy resembles the arts in having a significant relation to a canon. A philosopher situates the problems to be addressed by reference to a series of classical texts. Because it has no specific subject matter, but only characteristic methods, philosophy is defined as a discipline by the activities of its great practitioners. The earliest people whom we recognize as philosophers, the Presocratics, were also scientists, and several of them were also religious leaders. They did not yet think of themselves as belonging to a common profession, the one with which we twenty-first-century philosophers claim continuity. It was Plato who in his writings first used the word ‘philosophy’ in some approximation to our modern sense. Those of us who call ourselves philosophers today can genuinely lay claim to be the heirs of Plato and Aristotle. But we are only a small subset of their heirs. What distinguishes us from the other heirs of the great Greeks, and what entitles us to inherit their name, is that unlike the physicists, the astronomers, the medics, the linguists, we phil-

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osophers pursue the goals of Plato and Aristotle only by the same methods as were already available to them.

If philosophy lies somewhere between the sciences and the arts, what is the answer to the question ‘Is there progress in philosophy?’

There are those who think that the major task of philosophy is to cure us of intellectual confusion. On this, modest, view of the philosopher’s role, the tasks to be addressed differ across history, since each period needs a different form of therapy. The knots into which the undisciplined mind ties itself differ from age to age, and different mental motions are necessary to untie the knots. A prevalent malady of our own age, for instance, is the temptation to think of the mind as a computer, whereas earlier ages were tempted to think of it as a telephone exchange, a pedal organ, a homunculus, or a spirit. Maladies of earlier ages may be dormant, such as belief that the stars are living beings; or they may return, such as the belief that the stars enable one to predict human behaviour.

The therapeutic view of philosophy, however, may seem to allow only for variation over time, not for genuine progress. But that is not necessarily true. A confusion of thought may be so satisfactorily cleared up by a philosopher that it no longer offers temptation to the unwary thinker. One such example will be considered at length in the first volume of this history. Parmenides, the founder of the discipline of ontology (the science of being), based much of his system on a systematic confusion between different senses of the verb ‘to be’. Plato, in one of his dialogues, sorted out the issues so successfully that there has never again been an excuse for mixing them up: indeed, it now takes a great effort of philosophical imagination to work out exactly what led Parmenides into confusion in the first place.

Progress of this kind is often concealed by its very success: once a philosophical problem is resolved, no one regards it as any more a matter of philosophy. It is like treason in the epigram: ‘Treason doth never prosper, what’s the reason? | For if it prosper none dare call it treason.’

The most visible form of philosophical progress is progress in philosophical analysis. Philosophy does not progress by making regular additions to a quantum of information; as has been said, what philosophy offers is not information but understanding. Contemporary philosophers, of course, know some things that the greatest philosophers of the past did not know; but the things that they know are not philosophical matters but the truths

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that have been discovered by the sciences begotten of philosophy. But there are also some things that philosophers of the present day understand which even the greatest philosophers of earlier generations failed to understand. For instance, philosophers clarify language by distinguishing between different senses of words; and once a distinction has been made, future philosophers have to take account of it in their deliberations.

Take, as an example, the issue of free will. At a certain point in the history of philosophy a distinction was made between two kinds of human freedom: liberty of indifference (ability to do otherwise) and liberty of spontaneity (ability to do what you want). Once this distinction has been made the question ‘Do human beings enjoy freedom of the will?’ has to be answered in a way that takes account of the distinction. Even someone who believes that the two kinds of liberty coincide has to provide arguments to show this; he cannot simply ignore the distinction and hope to be taken seriously on the topic.

It is unsurprising, given the relationship of philosophy to a canon, that one notable form of philosophical progress consists in coming to terms with, and interpreting, the thoughts of the great philosophers of the past. The great works of the past do not lose their importance in philosophy—but their intellectual contributions are not static. Each age interprets and applies philosophical classics to its own problems and aspirations. This is, in recent years, most visible in the field of ethics. The ethical works of Plato and Aristotle are as influential in moral thinking today as the works of any twentieth-century moralists—this is easily verified by taking any citation index—but they are being interpreted and applied in ways quite different from the ways in which they were applied in the past. These new interpretations and applications do effect a genuine advance in our understanding of Plato and Aristotle; but of course it is understanding of quite a different kind from what is given by a new study of the chronology of Plato’s dialogues or a stylometric comparison between Aristotle’s various ethical works. The new light we receive resembles rather the enhanced appreciation of Shakespeare we may get by seeing a new and intelligent production of *King Lear*.

The historian of philosophy, whether primarily interested in philosophy or primarily interested in history, cannot help being both a philosopher and a historian. A historian of painting does not have to be a painter; a historian of medicine does not, *qua* historian, practise medicine. But a

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historian of philosophy cannot help doing philosophy in the very writing of history. It is not just that someone who knows no philosophy will be a bad historian of philosophy; it is equally true that someone who has no idea of how to cook will be a bad historian of cookery. The link between philosophy and its history is a far closer one. The historical task itself forces historians of philosophy to paraphrase their subjects' opinions, to offer reasons why past thinkers held the opinions they did, to speculate on the premisses left tacit in their arguments, and to evaluate the coherence and cogency of the inferences they drew. But the supplying of reasons for philosophical conclusions, the detection of hidden premisses in philosophical arguments, and the logical evaluation of philosophical inferences are themselves full-blooded philosophical activities. Consequently, any serious history of philosophy must itself be an exercise in philosophy as well as in history.

On the other hand, the historian of philosophy must have a knowledge of the historical context in which past philosophers wrote their works. When we explain historical actions, we ask for the agent's reasons; if we find a good reason, we think we have understood his action. If we conclude he did not have good reason, even in his own terms, we have to find, different, more complicated explanations. What is true of action is true of taking a philosophical view. If the philosophical historian finds a good reason for a past philosopher's doctrine, then his task is done. But if he concludes that the past philosopher has no good reason, he has a further and much more difficult task, of explaining the doctrine in terms of the context in which it appeared—social, perhaps, as well as intellectual.<sup>1</sup>

History and philosophy are closely linked even in the first-hand quest for original philosophical enlightenment. In modern times this has been most brilliantly illustrated by the masterpiece of the great nineteenth-century German philosopher Gottlob Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic*. Almost half of Frege's book is devoted to discussing and refuting the view of other philosophers and mathematicians. While he is discussing the opinions of others, he ensures that some of his own insights are artfully insinuated, and this makes easier the eventual presentation of his own theory. But the main purpose of his lengthy polemic is to convince readers of the seriousness of the problems to which he will later offer solutions.

<sup>1</sup> The magnitude of this task is well brought out by Michael Frede in the introduction to his *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

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Without this preamble, he says, we would lack the first prerequisite for learning anything: knowledge of our own ignorance.

Most histories of philosophy, in this age of specialization, are the work of many hands, specialists in different fields and periods. In inviting me to write, single-handed, a history of philosophy from Thales to Derrida, Oxford University Press gave expression to the belief that there is something to be gained by presenting the development of philosophy from a single viewpoint, linking ancient, medieval, early modern, and contemporary philosophy into a single narrative concerned with connected themes. The work will appear in four volumes: the first will cover the centuries from the beginning of philosophy up to the conversion of St Augustine in AD 387. The second will take the story from Augustine up to the Lateran Council of 1512. The third will end with the death of Hegel in 1831. The fourth and final volume will bring the narrative up to the end of the second millennium.

Obviously, I cannot claim to be an expert on all the many philosophers whom I will discuss in the volumes of this work. However, I have published books on major figures within each of the periods of the four volumes: on Aristotle (*The Aristotelian Ethics* and *Aristotle on the Perfect Life*), on Aquinas (*Aquinas on Mind* and *Aquinas on Being*), on Descartes (*Descartes: A Study of his Philosophy* and *Descartes: Philosophical Letters*), and on Frege and Wittgenstein (*Frege and Wittgenstein* as Penguin introductions and *The Legacy of Wittgenstein*). I hope that the work that went into the writing of these books gave me an insight into the philosophical style of four different eras in the history of philosophy. It certainly gave me a sense of the perennial importance of certain philosophical problems and insights.

I hope to write my history in a manner that takes account of the points I have raised in this Introduction. I do not suffer from any Whiggish illusion that the current state of philosophy represents the highest point of philosophical endeavour yet reached. On the contrary, my primary purpose in writing the book is to show that in many respects the philosophy of the great dead philosophers has not dated, and that today one may gain philosophical illumination by a careful reading of the great works that we have been privileged to inherit.

The kernel of any kind of historiography of philosophy is exegesis: the close reading and interpretation of philosophical texts. Exegesis may be of two kinds, internal or external. In internal exegesis the interpreter tries to

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render the text coherent and consistent, making use of the principle of charity in interpretation. In external exegesis the interpreter seeks to bring out the significance of the text by comparing it and contrasting it with other texts.

Exegesis may form the basis of the two quite different historical endeavours that I described at the beginning of this Introduction. In one, which we may call historical philosophy, the aim is to reach philosophical truth, or philosophical understanding, about the matter or issue under discussion in the text. Typically, historical philosophy looks for the reasons behind, or the justification for, the statements made in the text under study. In the other endeavour, the history of ideas, the aim is not to reach the truth about the matter in hand, but to reach the understanding of a person or an age or a historical succession. Typically the historian of ideas looks not for the reasons so much as the sources, or causes, or motives, for saying what is said in the target text.

Both of these disciplines base themselves on exegesis, but of the two, the history of ideas is the one most closely bound up with the accuracy and sensitivity of the reading of the text. It is possible to be a good philosopher while being a poor exegete. At the beginning of his *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein offers a discussion of St Augustine's theory of language. What he writes is very dubious exegesis; but this does not weaken the force of his philosophical criticism of the 'Augustinian' theory of language. But Wittgenstein did not really think of himself as engaged in historical philosophy, any more than he thought of himself as engaged in the historiography of ideas. The invocation of the great Augustine as the author of the mistaken theory is intended merely to indicate that the error is one that is worth attacking.

In different histories of philosophy the skills of the historian and those of the philosopher are exercised in different proportions. The due proportion varies in accordance with the purpose of the work and the field of philosophy in question. The pursuit of historical understanding and the pursuit of philosophical enlightenment are both legitimate approaches to the history of philosophy, but both have their dangers. Historians who study the history of thought without being themselves involved in the philosophical problems that exercised past philosophers are likely to sin by superficiality. Philosophers who read ancient, medieval, or early modern texts without a knowledge of the historical context in which they were

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written are likely to sin by anachronism. Rare is the historian of philosophy who can tread firmly without falling into either trap.

Each of these errors can nullify the purpose of the enterprise. The historian who is unconcerned by the philosophical problems that troubled past writers has not really understood how they themselves conducted their thinking. The philosopher who ignores the historical background of past classics will gain no fresh light on the issues that concern us today, but merely present contemporary prejudices in fancy dress.

The two dangers threaten in different proportions in different areas of the history of philosophy. In the area of metaphysics it is superficiality which is most to be guarded against: to someone without a personal interest in fundamental philosophical problems the systems of the great thinkers of the past will seem only quaint lunacy. In political philosophy the great danger is anachronism: when we read Plato's or Aristotle's criticisms of democracy, we shall not make head or tail of them unless we know something about the institutions of ancient Athens. In between metaphysics and political philosophy stand ethics and philosophy of mind: here both dangers threaten with roughly equal force.

I shall attempt in these volumes to be both a philosophical historian and a historical philosopher. Multi-authored histories are sometimes structured chronologically and sometimes structured thematically. I shall try to combine both approaches, offering in each volume first a chronological survey, and then a thematic treatment of particular philosophical topics of abiding importance. The reader whose primary interest is historical will focus on the chronological survey, referring where necessary to the thematic sections for amplification. The reader who is more concerned with the philosophical issues will concentrate rather on the thematic sections of the volumes, referring back to the chronological surveys to place particular issues in context.

Thus in this first volume I offer in the first part a conventional chronological tour from Pythagoras to Augustine, and in the second part a more detailed treatment of topics where I believe we have still much to learn from our predecessors in classical Greece and imperial Rome. The topics of these thematic sections have been chosen partly with an eye to the development of the same themes in the volumes that are yet to come.

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The audience I have in mind is at the level of second- or third-year undergraduate study. I realize, however, that many of those interested in the history of philosophy may themselves be enrolled in courses that are not primarily philosophical. Accordingly, I shall do my best not to assume a familiarity with contemporary philosophical techniques or terminology. I aim also to write in a manner clear and light-hearted enough for the history to be enjoyed by those who read it not for curricular purposes but for their own enlightenment and entertainment.