

PRAISE FOR *SOCRATES' CHILDREN*

“When I first began to pursue philosophy, I wanted a single resource to introduce me to all its principal players, to teach me their names, relative importance, and chief works, and to help me think their greatest thoughts. I wanted an introduction that let the philosophers have their say, but at the same time avoided the false impartiality of indifference to truth—one that, moreover, went about the whole daunting business with such brevity, directness, enthusiasm, wonder, storytelling, and humor as would suit my needs as a beginner. That resource did not exist. Now it does. It is *Socrates' Children*.”

—**Michael Augros**, Author of *Who Designed the Designer?* and *The Immortal in You*

“The moral, social, and religious problems of our time all ultimately reflect deep philosophical errors and thus, at least in part, require a philosophical solution. Yet philosophy has in recent decades retreated so far within the academy that the average person would not know where to begin to look for instruction. Peter Kreeft has long helped to remedy this problem, and this new work may be his most important yet.”

—**Edward Feser**, Professor of Philosophy, Pasadena City College

“Peter Kreeft provides bite-sized snapshots of one hundred of the most famous and influential philosophers who shape, often in unrealized ways, today’s world. In his trademark crisp and clear style, he presents ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary thinkers. While putting each philosopher in historical context, *Socrates' Children* also avoids historical relativism. This book provides both historical context and philosophical summaries of the most important ideas of the most important philosophers. Kreeft focuses on the ideas that make a difference for our lives, as well as on the most influential views of all time.”

—**Christopher Kaczor**, Chair of the Department of Philosophy at Loyola Marymount University, St. Thomas Aquinas Fellow for the Renewal of Catholic Intellectual Life for the Word on Fire Institute

“Philosophy professors are always seeking ways to reach students with fresh approaches to the wisdom we have found so wonderful. Here is a fine option.”

—**Ronda Chervin**, Emerita Professor of Philosophy at Holy Apostles College and Seminary

“True philosophy is a love affair: as Socrates taught long ago, philosophy is born in wonder, and is lived in passionate seeking. In *Socrates’ Children*, Peter Kreeft guides the beginner through the history of philosophy with his characteristic wonder, wit, and wisdom. Reading these volumes is like taking a class in philosophy with one of its greatest living teachers. In Kreeft’s hands, the history of philosophy becomes a dramatic story, a great conversation punctuated with surprise, humor, and insight. For the beginner curious about philosophy, beware: to pick up *Socrates’ Children* is to embark on the great adventure of philosophical thinking, and so to risk falling in love. And when you fall in love, life is changed forever.”

—**Paul A. Camacho**, Professor of Philosophy and Associate Director of the Augustinian Institute, Villanova University

SOCRATES' CHILDREN

SOCRATES' CHILDREN

AN INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY FROM
THE 100 GREATEST PHILOSOPHERS

Volume I: Ancient Philosophers

Peter Kreeft

Illustrations by Peter Voth

WORD  on FIRE.
— INSTITUTE —

Published by the Word on Fire Institute, an imprint of
Word on Fire, Elk Grove Village, IL 60007
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Design, typesetting, diagrams, and interior art direction by
Katherine Spitler, Rozann Lee, Cassie Bielak, and Michael Stevens

Cover design and illustrations by Peter Voth

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First Edition published 2019 by St. Augustine's Press
Second Edition 2023

Third printing, January 2024
First published February 2023
Reprinted August 2023

ISBN: 978-1-685780-06-7

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021922429

to William Harry Jellema,
Brand Blanshard,
Balduin Schwarz,
and W. Norris Clarke, SJ,

who taught me how to philosophize

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(indicates important philosophers; ** indicates very important philosophers;*

**** indicates the most important philosopher)*

A Salesman's-Pitch

Introduction to This Book

Why the History of Philosophy Is the Best Introduction to Philosophy

There have been two very different conceptions of philosophy in the English-speaking world for the last century. Traditionally, philosophy was about life, and it was something to be lived. Philosophers were looked up to as “wise men” rather than “wise guys.” Philosophical reason was something computers simply did not have. But ever since (1) Russell and Whitehead’s *Principia Mathematica* in 1910, 1912, and 1913; (2) Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* in 1921; and (3) Ayer’s *Language, Truth and Logic* in 1936, there has been a new conception of the task of the philosopher: (a) not to tell us what is, but to analyze the language of those who do; (b) in so doing, to imitate scientific and mathematical thinking, which is “digital,” rather than ordinary language, which is “analog”; and (c) to that end, to use symbolic, or mathematical, logic (basically, computer logic) rather than traditional, Aristotelian, ordinary-language logic.

Indeed, this has been the mainline conception of philosophy in English-speaking cultures for over half a century. It calls itself “analytic philosophy.” It has moved far beyond the early, narrow, and dogmatic claims for it, such as Ayer’s, but its *style* of philosophical writing is still easily identifiable: you can spot an analytic philosopher by reading just one paragraph.

Such philosophers are useful as vacuum cleaners and garbage collectors are useful: to identify and dispose of waste. They clean well. But they do not cook very tasty or interesting meals. I think large philosophy departments should have at least one and at most two of them, as restaurants should have cleaning crews.

The best way to teach philosophy is by a story: the dramatic story of the history of philosophy, the narrative of the “great conversation,” which you find in the “great books.” It’s politically incorrect to say it, but there is indeed a canon

or list of great books. That's why Plato and Shakespeare never die. Of course, the canon is arguable and not sacrosanct. It's only human. It's not a canon of sacred scriptures.

The most effective way to teach *anything* is by a story, a narrative. All the great teachers used stories, parables, examples, analogies, illustrations. It's really very easy to get ordinary human beings interested in philosophy: just put the picture back into the frame. The frame is the abstract, difficult questions that philosophers ask. The picture is the context of history, where they actually came from: the real, lived human conversations and arguments that passionately divided real individuals like Socrates and the Sophists, and whole cultures like ancient Rome or medieval Christendom and modern, secular, scientific democracies.

The primary reason why the history of philosophy works better than analytic philosophy—the primary reason why most students love it and often become philosophers and philosophy teachers through it—is embarrassingly simple: because the great masters of the past are more *interesting* than present-day philosophers.

But we are too arrogant to admit that. We judge the past by the standards of the present; the opposite idea hardly ever even occurs to us. So we study the past not to learn from them but to teach them, to show how primitive they were compared to ourselves. I refute this “chronological snobbery” by three simple words: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle.

The sciences progress almost automatically; the humanities do not. Philosophy is one of the humanities, not one of the sciences.

Our ancestors made mistakes, just as we do, but different ones. Theirs are now usually obvious to us; our own are not, and therefore are much more harmful. They are the glasses through which we look rather than the things we look at. “To see ourselves as others see us” is to broaden our minds. We wonder how we will we appear to our remote descendants, but we cannot know. We cannot read the books that haven't been written yet. But we can know how we would look to our remote ancestors, for we can read their books.

The only alternative to listening to the many who have already spoken, and died, is listening to the few who are now alive and speaking: ourselves. The first option, often called “tradition,” is more democratic. It is what Chesterton called “the democracy of the dead”: extending the vote to those who otherwise would be disqualified not by accident of birth but by accident of death.

A scientist studies the history of science as a series of instructive errors and gradual progress to enlightenment. And this is right in science, because in science the past really is inferior to the present, and has been proved to be that. But it is not right to do this in philosophy because philosophy is not science, and past philosophers have *not* been proved to be inferior to present ones. Here is a proof of that fact—or, rather, of the fact that at least unconsciously we *believe* that they were wiser than we are, and not vice versa: we do not speak of “modern wisdom”

but of “ancient wisdom.” The noun we spontaneously connect with “modern” is not “wisdom” but “knowledge.” Knowledge is incremental, like a stairway—it naturally progresses. Wisdom is not. And philosophy is the search for wisdom.

The best way to learn philosophy, then, is through its history. This is true even if your eventual goal is to be an analytic philosopher and analyze the issues logically and not historically (which is a perfectly legitimate and necessary job). For you simply can't find any better teachers to begin with than the ancients, especially Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, even if you want to move beyond them.

The history of philosophy is not a series of dead facts but living examples. It is not to be studied simply for its own sake. We should apprentice ourselves to the great minds of the past for our sakes, not for theirs; for the sake of the present and the future, not the past.

I have tried just about every possible way to introduce philosophy to beginners (and some impossible ways too), and by far the most effective one I have ever found is the great books, beginning with the dialogues of Plato. (Why anyone would oppose “great books” blows my mind. Do they prefer tiny books, shallow books, or stupid books?) Most of the great books in the history of philosophy are surprisingly short and surprisingly clear, for they were written for intelligent, literate ordinary people, not for other philosophers. (This becomes increasingly rare as we approach the present time.)

If Plato was the first great philosophical *writer*, Socrates, his teacher, was the first great *philosopher*. Plato was to Socrates what Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Paul were to Jesus. (Socrates, like Jesus and Buddha, wrote nothing. He was too busy *doing* it to publish it.) And Aristotle, Plato's prime pupil, is to the West what Confucius is to China: the archetype of common sense, the one whom subsequent thinkers either build on as a primary foundation or attack as a primary opponent.

So here is the story of philosophy. It's the story of a long, long series of arguments in a very large and dysfunctional family; and Socrates is its main patriarch, so I've called it *Socrates' Children*. Welcome to the commodious and contentious family of his children.

Something About Passion

Most philosophy textbooks aren't fully human because they deliberately cut out all emotions, such as enthusiasm and wonder—even though Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle all said that wonder was the origin of philosophy! Most textbook authors try to imitate computers. I gladly announce that I am not a computer. I am a person, with both rational and irrational passions and feelings. One of these is the passion for philosophy, and the conviction that philosophy should be exciting—rather, that it is exciting, and therefore should be taught that way.

I am convinced that reason and passion, head and heart, are both very, very valuable and ought to be allies, not enemies.

The purpose of an introduction to philosophy is to introduce philosophy—that is, to lead-into (the literal meaning of “introduction”) the-love-of-wisdom (the literal meaning of “philosophy”). To lead-into, not merely to see-and-analyze-from-afar. To be a door, not a microscope. And to lead the reader into the-love-of-wisdom, not the-cultivation-of-cleverness.

Love is a passion. Without blood from the heart, the brain does not work well. Without the will to understand, we do not understand. The brain is not merely a computer; it is a *human* brain. My ambition in this book is not just to inform and to summarize historical facts. I want to be your matchmaker. Jack and Jill, come up the hill and meet Plato. Fall in love with him. Struggle, be puzzled, get angry, fight your way out of the cave. This book is not just *data*—this is drama.

Why This Book?

I decided to write this book when the umpteenth person asked me the following question: “Could you recommend just one book that covers the whole history of philosophy that beginners can understand and even get excited about?”

Since I could not answer that question in words, I decided to try to answer it in deeds. I write the books I want to read when nobody else will write them. Sometimes you have to write a book first in order to get the satisfaction of reading it.

Twenty-one features make this book distinctive:

1. *It is “existential,” practical, personal.* Philosophy is about human life and thought, so I concentrated on the ideas that *make a difference* to our experience, to our lives. That is William James’ “pragmatic criterion of truth.” His point is that if you can’t specify *what difference it makes* if you believe or disbelieve an idea, then that idea is neither true nor false in any humanly significant sense.
2. *It is selective.* It doesn’t try to cover too much. For an “introduction” means, literally, a “leading-into” rather than a summary or survey. It is not the last word but a first word, a beginning, for it is for beginners. Little philosophers get only a page or two; great philosophers get only a dozen; medium-sized philosophers get between three and six.
3. *It concentrates on the “Big Ideas.”* (In fact, I thought of entitling it “What’s the Big Idea?”) This involves minimizing or omitting many “smaller” ideas. I think it is true of ideas, as of friends, that you can have too many of them. Better to have a few that are deeply understood and cherished than to have many that are not.

This book includes only what most students will find valuable. They will find valuable only what they remember years later. They will remember years later only those ideas that make a difference to their lives. And that's usually one Big Idea from each philosopher.

4. *It covers one hundred philosophers.* I chose them by two standards: (a) intrinsic excellence, wisdom, and importance; and (b) extrinsic historical influence and fame.
5. *It gives much more space to the "Big Nine": Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Hume, Kant, and Hegel.* These are the most influential philosophers of all time.
6. *It presents the history of philosophy as a story, a "great conversation."* A book about the history of philosophy is not about history but about philosophy; yet, philosophers can be understood best historically, as partners in a dialogue with other philosophers. The whole history of Western philosophy is a very long and complex Socratic dialogue. The dialogue is exciting, for thought-revolutions are more important than political revolutions, and battles between ideas are more important than battles between armies.
7. On the other hand, *its point of view is not historical relativism.* I do not try to explain away any philosophers by reducing them to creatures of their times, as Marxists and Hegelians do. Though humans are rooted in *humus* (earth) like trees, yet like trees we also reach into the sky. Historians read the *Times*, but philosophers try to read the eternities.
8. *It is for beginners, not scholars.* It is not "scholarly" in style. It does not break new ground in content. It does not push any new philosophical theory.
9. *It is not "dumbed down."* Even though it is for beginners, it is for intelligent beginners, not dumb beginners. (It is also appropriate for intelligent high school seniors and for graduate students in departments other than philosophy.)
10. *It is for college courses in the history of philosophy.* But it is also a "do-it-yourself" book that does not require a teacher to interpret it.
11. *Its point of view is traditional rather than fashionable.* It neither assumes nor tries to prove any one particular philosophical position. Though I try to be fair to all philosophers and get "into their heads," I confess at the outset *a sympathy for common sense.* In philosophical terms, this usually (but not always) means, in one word, Aristotle rather than, for example, Nietzsche, Marx, or Derrida.
12. *It tries to be both clear and profound, both logical and existential.* For two or three generations, philosophers have been divided into two camps separated by these two ideals. English-speaking analytic philosophers have sought maximum clarity and logic, while continental philosophers have sought a more synthetic "big picture" that is more profound and existential. The result is that the former sound like chirping birds while the latter sound like muttering witch doctors.

I try to bridge this gap by going back to Socrates, who demanded both clarity and profundity. Many other philosophers today are also trying to bridge that gap by dialoguing with each other across the Channel.

13. *Like Socrates, it takes logic seriously.* Therefore, *it summarizes not just conclusions but arguments*, and evaluates them logically. But it uses ordinary-language logic, commonsense logic, Socratic logic, rather than the artificial language of modern mathematical, symbolic logic.
14. *It uses three kinds of logic*, as Socrates did:
 - a. It uses *inductive* logic by grounding and testing its abstract and general ideas in concrete and particular instances.
 - b. It uses *deductive* logic in tracing practices back to their principles and principles back to their premises, and in following premises, principles, and practices out to their logical conclusions.
 - c. And it uses *seductive* logic as a woman would seduce a man by her beauty. For philosophy can be very beautiful.
15. *It naturally interfaces with religion.* Many of the questions philosophers ask are also questions religion claims to answer, though the methods of these two enterprises are fundamentally different: philosophy uses human reason alone, while religion relies on faith in something that is more than human. Therefore, this book naturally interfaces with religion in its questions, but not in its methods. Neither religious belief nor unbelief is either presupposed or aimed at.
16. *It is so unfashionable as to seek truth, of all things!* Much of contemporary philosophy looks like intellectual navel-gazing. But real philosophy ("the love of wisdom") seeks the fruit of truth, not just fun, play, or displays of cleverness. It is mentally procreative.
17. *It emphasizes the classical philosophers*, for two reasons:
 - a. We don't yet know which contemporary philosophers will be acknowledged as great and which will be forgotten. It takes time for history, like a sieve, to sort out the big and little stones. Every era makes mistakes about itself. "Our era is the only one that doesn't" is perhaps the stupidest mistake of all.
 - b. The questions contemporary philosophers typically ask are not the questions real people ask. They are questions like whether we can prove that we're not just brains in vats being hypnotized into seeing a world that isn't there. How many people do you know who worry about that question? I suspect even philosophers don't really worry about it if they're sane; they just pretend to. (In other words, they pretend to be insane.) Real people ask questions like: What are we? What should we be? Why were we born? Why must we suffer? Why must we die? Why do we kill? How should we live? Is there a God? An afterlife? Where does morality come from? What is the greatest good? How do you know?

18. *It is full of surprises.* It emphasizes things readers probably do *not* already know, understand, or believe. It does not patronizingly pass off clichés as profundities. It emphasizes wonder, since “philosophy begins in wonder.”

This does not contradict its preference for common sense (point 11 above), for common sense, when explored, turns out to be more wonderful than any cleverly invented ideologies. For real life is much more fantastic than any fantasy; fantasy only imitates life, while life imitates nothing. (You can learn this, and similar things, from the most maverick pick among my one hundred philosophers, G.K. Chesterton.)

19. *It dares to be funny.* It includes humor whenever relevant, because reality does. Reality is in fact amazingly funny.
20. *It includes visual aids.* We both learn and remember more effectively with our eyes than with our ears.
21. The treatment of each of the 100 philosophers usually contains *eleven parts*, as follows:
 1. A *portrait* of the philosopher.
 2. A brief *bio*, including *the seven W's*:
 - a. *Who*: his complete name
 - b. *Where*: his place of birth and nationality
 - c. *When*: his birth and death
 - d. *What*: his job or career
 - e. *Whimsy*: unusual, dramatic, or humorous facts or legends about him
 - f. *Which*: his most famous book
 - g. *Why* he asked the questions he did, which is the next point (point 3). Obviously, some philosophers' lives are much more interesting than others. Some philosophers are almost all life and hardly any theory (e.g., Diogenes the Cynic); others are almost all theory and almost no life (e.g., Hegel).
 3. His *historical situation* and problem; his dialogue with previous philosophers.
 4. His *Big Idea* or central insight or most important teaching.
 5. His *most famous quotation(s)*. (You will find the following piece of advice unusual but practical, I think. When you come to a quotation from a philosopher in this book, long or short, read it *aloud*. This helps you to remember and also to more deeply understand it, because this not only reinforces one sense [seeing] with another [hearing] but also brings into play your unconscious mind, your intuition and feelings.)
 6. A *diagram* or sketch whenever possible, translating the abstract idea into a visual image.
 7. The *practical difference* the idea makes:
 - a. to life—to *your* life;

- b. to thought (the idea's logical implications); and
 - c. to history (to subsequent thinkers).
8. The essential *argument(s)* for this idea.
 9. The essential *argument(s)* against it.
 10. A short, recommended *bibliography*, both primary and secondary sources, but only when readable and helpful. (These bibliographies at the end of some of the chapters in this book—only the important ones—are for beginners, not scholars. They are chosen for readability, for their power to interest and move the reader.)
 11. *Probable reading experience*; hints to make the philosopher come clear and alive.

A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy

The best introduction to philosophy is the history of philosophy. The best answer to the question “What is philosophy?” is not an ideal definition of it but real examples of it. If you want to know what philosophy is, read philosophers.

Start with Plato. Whitehead famously summarized the whole history of Western philosophy as “footnotes to Plato.” (I thought of using that for the title of this book.) Plato is the first philosopher from whom we have whole books. He is the greatest philosophical writer, for no philosopher has ever improved on his style.

Philosophy Begins in Wonder

Philosophy, according to its three greatest inventors—Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—begins in wonder and ends in wisdom. It is literally “the love (*philia*, friendship) of wisdom (*sophia*).”

“Wonder” means three things:

1. It starts with *surprise* (e.g., “What a wonder!—that despite my deepest desire to live, I must die!”).
2. It leads to *questioning* (e.g., “I wonder *why* I must die”).
3. It ends with deepened *appreciation* (e.g., “How wonderful that my life, like a picture, has a frame, a limit! How wonderful that what I so deeply fear—death—I also deeply need!”).

The first kind of wonder (surprise) leads to the second (questioning). We question only what we find remarkable. And the second kind of wonder (questioning), when successful, leads to the third kind (appreciation, contemplative wonder): we contemplate, and appreciate, and intellectually “eat” the truths we discover through questioning and investigating and reasoning.

The Divisions of Philosophy

What do philosophers ask questions about? These are the *divisions* of philosophy. They include four main parts:

1. *Metaphysics*, which is the study of the truths, laws, or principles that apply to all reality, not just physics but “beyond” (*meta*) those limits, though including them.
2. *Philosophical anthropology*, or philosophical psychology, which is the philosophical study of human nature, or the self.
3. *Epistemology*, which is the study of knowing and how we know; this can include logic and methodology.
4. *Ethics*, which is the study of what we ought to do and be.

In other words:

1. What is real?
2. What am I?
3. How can I know?
4. What should I do?

But philosophers also apply philosophy to many other areas, such as:

1. social and political philosophy
 2. philosophy of religion
 3. philosophy of education
 4. philosophy of art, or aesthetics
 5. philosophy of science
- etc.

We can philosophize about anything: sexuality, sports, humor, even soup. E.g., I wrote a philosophy of surfing entitled *I Surf. Therefore I Am*.

The Importance of Philosophy

Why is philosophy important?

1. Because it is distinctively human. Animals do not philosophize because they know too little, and God, gods, or angels do not philosophize because they know too much. To be human is to philosophize, for to be human is to wonder.

2. Because it makes a difference to everything. Sometimes the difference is a matter of life or death. Wars are fought for philosophical reasons. The Civil War was fought over the rightness or wrongness of slavery. World War II was fought over fascism, which was a philosophy. The Cold War was fought over a philosophy: Marxism, or communism. The present “culture wars” are being fought throughout Western civilization over many related philosophical issues: religion, human nature, “natural laws,” human sexuality, the meaning of marriage and family, whether human lives have absolute or relative value, just and unjust wars, and the role of the state in human life.

Books of Philosophy

For a short but dramatic introduction to philosophy, I recommend you read four of the dialogues of Plato that center around the death of Socrates, the first great philosopher: *Euthyphro*, *Crito*, *Apology*, and *Phaedo*. Or—a very distant second best—read my *Philosophy 101 by Socrates: An Introduction to Philosophy via Plato's "Apology."*

The best way to learn philosophy is not through books *about* the philosophers—books like this one—but from the books written *by* the philosophers. Fortunately, most great philosophers wrote short, simpler books as well as long, harder ones; and almost always it was the shorter ones that became classics. For instance:

PHILOSOPHER	EASY, SHORT BOOK	HARD, LONG BOOK
Plato	<i>Apology</i>	<i>Republic</i>
Augustine	<i>Confessions</i>	<i>City of God</i>
Boethius	<i>The Consolation of Philosophy</i>	<i>On the Trinity</i>
Anselm	<i>Proslogion</i>	<i>Monologion</i>
Bonaventure	<i>Journey of the Mind to God</i>	(many)
Machiavelli	<i>The Prince</i>	<i>The Discourses</i>
Pascal	<i>Pensées</i>	<i>Provincial Letters</i>
Descartes	<i>Discourse on Method</i>	<i>Meditations</i>
Leibniz	<i>Monadology</i>	(many)
Berkeley	<i>Three Dialogues between Hylas & Philonous</i>	(many)
Hume	<i>An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding</i>	<i>A Treatise of Human Nature</i>

PHILOSOPHER	EASY, SHORT BOOK	HARD, LONG BOOK
Kant	<i>Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals</i>	<i>Critique of Practical Reason</i>
Heidegger	<i>Discourse on Thinking</i>	<i>Being and Time</i>
Sartre	<i>Existentialism and Human Emotions</i>	<i>Being and Nothingness</i>
Marx	<i>The Communist Manifesto</i>	<i>Capital</i>
Kierkegaard	<i>Philosophical Fragments</i>	<i>Concluding Unscientific Postscript</i>
Marcel	<i>The Philosophy of Existentialism</i>	<i>The Mystery of Being</i>

Unfortunately, four of the most important philosophers—Aristotle, Aquinas, Hegel, and Nietzsche—never wrote a short, clear, and simple book (though Aristotle wrote a long and simple one, the *Nicomachean Ethics*; Nietzsche wrote a few short but not simple ones; and Aquinas wrote a very long and clear but not simple one, the *Summa theologiae*).

Philosophy and Religion

Philosophy is not religion and religion is not philosophy.

All religions, however diverse their content, originate in faith rather than pure reason, and their ultimate appeal is to divine authority, the authority of divinely revealed scriptures (e.g., the Bible, the Quran), or institutions (e.g., the Catholic Church), or mystical experiences (e.g., Buddhist *nirvana*).

Philosophy, classically conceived, originates in and is justified by appeal to reason. Medieval philosophers often use philosophical reason to justify religious faith (e.g., rational proofs for the existence of God). Ironically, modern philosophers, in reaction against medieval philosophy, often begin by questioning the validity of faith and end by questioning the validity of reason and substituting ideology, feeling, or will (e.g., Hobbes, Hume, Rousseau, Kant, Fichte, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Dewey, Derrida). Philosophers who make this move usually construe “reason” much more narrowly than classical (premodern) philosophers did. They think of “reason” as *scientific* reasoning. If medieval philosophy is in bed with religion, modern philosophy is in bed with science.

The greatest difference between philosophers and other human beings is probably not philosophy but religion. For everyone has a philosophy, whether well thought out or not, but not everyone believes in a religion. According to the polls, only 5–10 percent of Americans identify themselves as atheists, but 75 percent of philosophers do. That fact explains why most histories of philosophy

do not understand religious philosophies very well. Religion, like sex, humor, and music, is something one understands from within much better than from without. Whenever I have my class argue about religion, I make the believers argue for atheism and the doubters, agnostics, and atheists argue for faith, and the result is always the same: the pretend atheists do a far better job than the pretend believers. Then we argue about whether this was because only the believers understood both sides or whether it was because the pretend believers had to argue for unarguable myths and superstitions.

This book is not about religion but about philosophy, but one of the primary questions of philosophy is whether something like God exists; for this idea makes more of a difference to everything else, both in life and in philosophy, than just about any other idea. It makes a difference to personal identity, death, morality, and “the meaning of life.” The God-idea is almost certainly either the most important error and illusion or the most important truth in the history of human thought. So a book on philosophy cannot ignore the idea. Most great philosophers did not. However, it treats the idea philosophically (by reason) rather than religiously (by faith). It is no part of this book either to presuppose or to try to prove or disprove religious faith, either overtly or as a hidden agenda. I have tried to be equally fair to all points of view, including philosophies I strongly disagree with such as nihilism, skepticism, Marxism, and even deconstructionism, which I cannot help suspecting is not even serious but just “jerking our chain.”

A Doable Do-It-Yourself Course in the Classics of Philosophy

Many people have asked me for a recommended booklist for a teach-yourself philosophy course. Many beginning philosophy teachers have asked me for a similar list for an introductory course in philosophy.

Again, I know of no more effective way to teach philosophy, to yourself or others, than the apprenticeship to the masters that is called the “great books.” The canon of great books is certainly not fixed, or stuffy, or irrelevant to today’s world. The list is pragmatic: it is a list of what has “worked.”

Based on my own experience of what works—that is, what (a) is comprehensible to beginners and (b) inspires them to think and perhaps even to fall in love with philosophy—here is my list.

There is a primary list and a secondary list for each of the four periods in the history of philosophy. For a high school course, one of these eight lists would seem to fit into one semester; for a college course, two; and for a graduate course, three or four. The lists are deliberately short and selective; far better to spend much time with a few great friends than a little time with many little ones.

Ancient Philosophy (Primary)

Solomon, *Ecclesiastes*

Plato, *Meno* and *Apology*

Plato, *Republic*, excerpts. (If you use the Rouse translation, *Great Dialogues of Plato*, and mentally divide each book into three parts—A, B, and C—you could cover Book I, Book IIA, Books VB through VIIA, Book IXC, and Rouse’s helpful summary of the rest.)

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, excerpts. (Select your own excerpts but be sure to cover Books I and VIII.)

Plotinus, “Beauty”

Ancient Philosophy (Secondary)

Parmenides' poem

The rest of Plato's *Republic*

Plato, *Gorgias*

The rest of the *Nicomachean Ethics*

A secondary source summary of Aristotle, either Adler's *Aristotle for Everybody* (easy) or Ross' *Aristotle* (intermediate).

Medieval Philosophy (Primary)

Augustine, *Confessions* 1–10 (Word on Fire Classics edition, which uses the Sheed translation)

Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*

Anselm, *Proslogion*

Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, at least 1.2.3 (“On God’s Existence”) and 1-2.2 (“On Those Things in Which Happiness Consists”). These and more, with explanatory notes, are included in my *A Shorter Summa*.

Medieval Philosophy (Secondary)

Bonaventure, *Journey of the Mind to God*

Aquinas, more of the *Summa*. My *Summa of the Summa* anthology is five hundred pages, with many footnotes.

Nicholas of Cusa, *Of Learned Ignorance*

Modern Philosophy (Primary)

Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Descartes, *Discourse on Method*

Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*

Modern Philosophy (Secondary)

Pascal, *Pensées* (or my *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal's "Pensées"—Edited, Outlined & Explained*)

Descartes, *Meditations*

Leibniz, *Monadology*

Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, excerpts

Contemporary Philosophy (Primary)

Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (or *Existentialism Is a Humanism*)

James, “What Pragmatism Means” and “The Will to Believe” (short lectures)

Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*

C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*

Buber, *I and Thou*

Contemporary Philosophy (Secondary)

Mill, *Utilitarianism*

Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*

Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*

Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*

Clarke, *Person and Being*

A Personal Bibliography

Please note: this is merely *a* bibliography—one among many possible lists of recommended further reading—of other books I have written about these philosophers. The very best books to read are, of course, the books of the great philosophers themselves.

1. Solomon: *Three Philosophies of Life: Ecclesiastes: Life as Vanity, Job: Life as Suffering, Song of Songs: Life as Love* (chapter 1)
2. Shankara, Buddha, Confucius, and Lao Tzu: “Questions of Faith: The Philosophy of Religion” (recorded lectures)
3. Pre-Socratics, Greeks, and Moderns: *The Journey: A Spiritual Roadmap for Modern Pilgrims*
4. Socrates: *Philosophy 101 by Socrates: An Introduction to Philosophy via Plato’s “Apology”*
5. Plato: *The Platonic Tradition*
6. Plato: *A Socratic Introduction to Plato’s “Republic”*
7. Aristotelian logic: *Socratic Logic: A Logic Text Using Socratic Method, Platonic Questions, and Aristotelian Principles*
8. Jesus: *The Philosophy of Jesus*
9. Jesus: *Socrates Meets Jesus: History’s Greatest Questioner Confronts the Claims of Christ*
10. Jesus: *Jesus Shock*
11. Augustine: *I Burned for Your Peace: Augustine’s “Confessions” Unpacked*
12. Muhammad: *Between Allah & Jesus: What Christians Can Learn from Muslims*

13. Aquinas: *Summa of the Summa*
14. Aquinas: *A Shorter Summa: The Essential Philosophical Passages of St. Thomas Aquinas' "Summa Theologica" Edited and Explained*
15. Aquinas: "The Modern Scholar: The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas" (recorded lectures)
16. Aquinas: *Practical Theology: Spiritual Direction from Saint Thomas Aquinas*
17. Machiavelli: *Socrates Meets Machiavelli: The Father of Philosophy Cross-Examines the Author of "The Prince"*
18. Pascal: *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal's "Pensées"—Edited, Outlined & Explained*
19. Descartes: *Socrates Meets Descartes: The Father of Philosophy Analyzes the Father of Modern Philosophy's "Discourse on Method"*
20. Hume: *Socrates Meets Hume: The Father of Philosophy Meets the Father of Modern Skepticism—A Socratic Cross-Examination of Hume's "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding"*
21. Kant: *Socrates Meets Kant: The Father of Philosophy Meets His Most Influential Modern Child—A Socratic Cross-Examination of Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason" and "Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals"*
22. Marx: *Socrates Meets Marx: The Father of Philosophy Cross-Examines the Founder of Communism—A Socratic Dialogue on "The Communist Manifesto"*
23. Kierkegaard: *Socrates Meets Kierkegaard: The Father of Philosophy Meets the Father of Christian Existentialism*
24. Freud: *Socrates Meets Freud: The Father of Philosophy Meets the Father of Psychology*
25. Sartre: *Socrates Meets Sartre: The Founder of Philosophy Cross-Examines the Founder of Existentialism—A Socratic Dialogue on "Existentialism and Human Emotions"*
26. Tolkien: *The Philosophy of Tolkien: The Worldview Behind "The Lord of the Rings"*
27. Lewis: *C.S. Lewis for the Third Millennium: Six Essays on "The Abolition of Man"*

28. Modern philosophers systematically argued with from a Thomist perspective:
Summa Philosophica
29. The history of ethics: “What Would Socrates Do? The History of Moral Thought and Ethics” (recorded lectures)
30. Ethical classics: *Ethics for Beginners: Big Ideas from 32 Great Minds*

A Few Recommended Histories of Philosophy

Here are a few selected histories of philosophy that do not duplicate mine but have somewhat different ends.

1. Frederick Copleston, SJ, has written the most clear and complete multi-volume history of Western philosophy available, with increasing detail and attention as it gets more and more contemporary. It is not exciting or dramatic or “existential,” but it is very fair, clear, logical, and helpful.
2. Will Durant’s *The Story of Philosophy* is charmingly and engagingly written, though very selective and very personally angled toward Enlightenment thinkers.
3. Bertrand Russell, a major philosopher himself, has written a very intelligent, elegant, and witty little history of Western philosophy from the viewpoint of a modern Enlightenment atheist, semi-skeptic, and semi-materialist. Don’t expect fair and equal treatment of both sides.
4. Francis Parker’s one-volume history of philosophy up to Hegel, *The Story of Western Philosophy*, neatly structures this history by centering on the theme of the one and the many.
5. Mortimer Adler’s *Ten Philosophical Mistakes* does not offer a complete history but a diagnostic treatment of key errors in modern philosophy.
6. Étienne Gilson’s *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* does the same, finding reductionisms of philosophy to one of the sciences as a nearly universal modern error.
7. William Barrett’s *Irrational Man*, though purportedly only an introduction to existentialism, has some very powerfully written and engaging historical chapters on pre-existentialist philosophy from an existentialist viewpoint, as well as the best one-chapter summaries of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre available in print. His *The Illusion of Technique* thoughtfully compares James, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger.

8. Richard Tarnas' *The Passion of the Western Mind* is indeed passionate, and existential, and focuses on the more general surrounding historical and cultural events and influences.
9. Samuel Enoch Stumpf (*Socrates to Sartre*) and Robert Solomon and Kathleen Higgins (*A Short History of Philosophy*) have also produced good one-volume histories of Western philosophy.

Most philosophy texts today are not “great books” histories but anthologies of recent articles written by recent philosophers about recent systematic, logical issues. Most of these are thin, dry, technical, dull, and lacking in existential bite as well as style, though all of them are very intelligent. They have their place, but usually only math and science students, not English or history students, like them. Students, especially in the humanities, will find *histories* of philosophy much more interesting for the same reason they find stories more interesting than formulas, and dialogues more interesting than monologues. That was Plato's genius. His Socratic dialogues remain the single best introduction to philosophy ever written.

Introduction to Ancient Philosophy

Philosophy, unlike the human body, does not decline, grow old, and die. In fact, as Gilson said, “Philosophy always buries its undertakers” (of whom there have been many). And as Heidegger said, “What is great can only begin great.” Thus, the ancient (pre-medieval) era is the most important era of all for human culture, including philosophy, because it is the foundation for all that follows. As the poet says, “The child is the father of the man.”

In one sense, philosophy begins as soon as humankind begins; for asking, at some level, however inarticulate a subconscious, the great philosophical questions—about self, world, God, life, death, good, evil, truth, falsehood, matter, and mind—is as quintessentially human as making moral choices, falling in love, appreciating beauty, or inventing artifacts. In another sense, philosophy begins only when this innate curiosity is communicated in words, and more especially in lasting writing; and this happened, to some extent, in every culture that had writing, probably as early as the third millennium BC in India and Egypt. We explore this period very briefly in the section on “the sages.”

In a third and narrower sense, philosophy began in Greece in the fifth century BC, above all with one of the most remarkable, distinctive, and influential men who ever lived: Socrates. Socrates was the first man who clearly understood the nature, the rules, and the importance of rational argument. Socrates wrote nothing, but his student and disciple Plato wrote almost everything worth saying about philosophy. Emerson said simply that “Plato is philosophy and philosophy is Plato,” and Whitehead said that the best summary of the history of Western philosophy is that it is “footnotes to Plato.”

Here are the footnotes.



THE SAGES

Introduction to the Sages

In one sense “sages” are philosophers; in another sense they are not. They are included in this book because they are philosophers in the sense that they are lovers and teachers of wisdom. Wisdom is the knowledge of

- a. not just any reality but of *ultimate reality*, whatever that may be;
- b. not just any explanations and causes but of *first* or *ultimate causes*; and
- c. not just facts but of *values*, of the good.

But the sages are *not* philosophers in another sense: the way they reached their wisdom and the way they taught it was not primarily through logical reasoning but through intuition, immediate understanding, mystical experience, religious experience, or faith in divine revelation.

The sages asked many of the great philosophical questions: What is the unity of all things? What is our place in this grand scheme of things? How should we live? How can we become happy? What is evil and what should we do about it? But they explored these questions through unusual mental and spiritual gifts, not through common reason, as the philosophers did.

A Word About Reason

A word about one of the most crucial and most easily misunderstood terms in philosophy. In its ancient and traditional sense, “reason” means not only (1) the calculative *reasoning* or arguing, which computers can do much better than we can, but also (2) the discriminating *judgment* about which statements are true and which are false and (3) the intellectual *understanding* of concepts, which is expressed in definitions. Reasoning moves from one judgment, as a premise, to another, as a conclusion; a judgment judges that one concept, as predicate, is true of another, as subject. These (understanding, judging, and reasoning) are the traditionally distinguished “three acts of the mind” in Aristotelian logic.

Philosophy's method is to appeal to reason. Since reason is common to all, and since philosophers arrived at their conclusions by reason, we can evaluate them by the same power: reason. But since sages appeal to other powers that are *not* common to all, their teaching is usually passed down by the authority of tradition rather than reason alone. In fact, some (e.g., Shankara, Buddha, and Lao Tzu) see ordinary reason as a major *obstacle* to wisdom, and they teach a radical transformation of human consciousness itself.



SOLOMON

1011—931 BC

Solomon, David's son and Israel's second king, was reputed to be the wisest man in the world (1 Kings 3:12). Even today "the wisdom of Solomon" is a platitude of profound praise.

Ancient Jewish tradition credits Solomon with writing three books in the Hebrew Bible: the idealistic love lyrics of the Song of Solomon in his youth, the practical Proverbs in middle age, and the world-weary and cynical Ecclesiastes in old age. Most biblical scholars believe that Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes were both written long after Solomon's death; the authors used his name instead of their own out of respect for their revered teacher and archetype, as if I would write this book under the pseudonym "Socrates."

But we will explore "the philosophy of Solomon" through Ecclesiastes since Ecclesiastes is truly a work of *philosophy* and contains arguments, while Proverbs is just *proverbs* and Song of Solomon just *songs*. (I should not have said "just"—both proverbs and songs are of very great value. No society can be wise and happy without them.)

The Argument of Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes is a book of one Big Idea, stated at the beginning and at the end, and every verse in the book is part of the argument for this one idea. The Big Idea is

the author's answer to the most obvious, and obviously important, philosophical question of all: What is the meaning (end, purpose) of life?

And his answer is: Nothing. He is a nihilist ("nothing-ist"). "All is vanity." All attempts at finding the meaning and purpose of human life are in vain. The word translated "vanity" means literally "chasing after the wind."

The essential argument of the whole book can be summarized in a single syllogism:

All "toil" is "under the sun."

All that is "under the sun" is "vanity."

Therefore all "toil" is "vanity."

By "toil" he means "attempts at meaning, ways of living, lifestyles." By "under the sun" he means "in the world as it appears to everyone's ordinary observation." By "vanity" he means "having no ultimate purpose, point, or fulfillment."

Among the ways of life or lifestyles tested by the Solomonic author are the pursuit of (1) wisdom (Eccles. 1:13–17), (2) pleasure (2:1–2), (3) riches (2:4–8), (4) fame and honor (6:1–6; 9:13–15), and (5) religious piety (5:1–7).

Among the reasons why all that is "under the sun" is "vanity" are (1) the fact that it all ends in death (3:19–21; 12:2–8); (2) nature's indifference to justice (2:14–23; 7:15–17; 8:11; 8:14); (3) God's silence and unknowability (3:11; 7:13; 7:14; 11:5); (4) the problem of evil (3:16; 4:1–3; 10:1); and (5) the cyclical nature of time, which thwarts progress and hope (1:3–11, 2:1–9, 15).

Why such a despairing book is in the Bible is a question for the theologians rather than the philosophers, but it is probably part of the rabbinic confrontational teaching method in ancient Judaism, which was in one way surprisingly similar to the "Socratic Method" that Socrates would make famous later in Greece: teaching by dialectic, or dialogue, or debate; by question and answer. (Classic question: Why does a rabbi always answer a question with another question? Answer: Why shouldn't a rabbi answer a question with another question?)

The whole of religious Judaism is put into a debate in this book. The author implicitly asks: If the Jewish religion is the answer, what is the question? An answer is only as important as the question it answers. Ecclesiastes gets the question out: Isn't life really meaningless, as it seems to be to reason and observation? What is its ultimate meaning, its highest good, if it has one? Only at the very end does this book give the answer: "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil" (12:13–14). Probably, this was written by a second author in answer to the first one.

Meaninglessness, or "vanity," is unbearable and unlivable. Viktor Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning*, philosophizing about the Jewish experience in Nazi

concentration camps, noted that many weak prisoners survived if they only found a meaning to their sufferings while many strong ones died because they didn't. Quoting Nietzsche, he observed that "a man can endure almost any *how* if only he has a *why*."

That is hopeful. But we still have to answer Ecclesiastes, which gives good *reasons* for meaninglessness. Read the book yourself; it's easy to find these reasons everywhere in life: evil, death, pain, injustice, ignorance, folly, failure, even time itself. If all human life is "under the sun" (in the world we see) and if everything "under the sun" is "vanity" because of all these reasons, it logically follows that all of human life is vanity.

Any argument must pass three checkpoints to prove its conclusion, and thus there are only three ways to answer any argument. If you are to justify your disagreement with its conclusions, you must find (1) a term used ambiguously, (2) a false premise, or (3) a logical fallacy (so that the conclusion does not logically follow from the premises even if the premises are all true).

Can you answer "Solomon's" argument in any one of these three ways? Let yourself be challenged by this rabbi. See if you can hold your own with this devil's advocate. And if you can't—well, then perhaps you should read the other philosophers in this book to get some help.

Selected Bibliography

Three Philosophies of Life by Peter Kreeft



ZOROASTER

C. 600 BC

Zoroaster (a Greek version of the ancient Iranian name “Zarathustra”) lived in Eastern Iran, probably during the sixth century BC, though legends place him as early as 3000 BC. He founded the religion/philosophy of Zoroastrianism, which was once very widespread in Persia but was radically reduced by Islam. There are now about 250 million Zoroastrians left, most of them Parsis (or Parsees) in India.

Little is known about Zoroaster himself. He is said to have written many sacred scriptures, nearly all of which are lost, though the *Zend Avesta* partly survives. He claimed to be a prophet inspired by the one true God. He was rejected in his wife’s hometown, had great opposition spreading his teaching, and was murdered at an altar. (Prophets know that religion is a nonprofit organization.) Greek, Roman, and medieval legends (mistakenly) ascribed to him the invention of astrology and magic. Pliny says Zoroaster miraculously laughed on the day of his birth, and that his head pulsed so powerfully that it repelled your hand if you touched it. (The FDA would have mandated a warning label: “Danger! Philosophical Wisdom inside!”)

Nietzsche, the author of *Beyond Good and Evil* and the enemy of religion and morality, entitled his masterpiece *Thus Spake Zarathustra* to satirize Zoroaster’s moral and religious dualism (i.e., his idea of the world as a battleground between good and evil).

When Muslims conquered Persia, they came to the conclusion that Zoroaster was a true prophet of the one true God, like Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad.

Four Dualisms

Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Taoism, and Hinduism are all forms of good-evil dualisms. But they are all different:

Manichaeism, founded by Mani (AD 226–276), also labeled Zoroaster a prophet, along with Jesus and Buddha, but Manichaeism changed Zoroaster's doctrine from monotheism to a two-god dualism, denied that God created the material world, and declared all matter evil. Augustine flirted with Manichaeism for a decade before he rejected it as irrational and immoral.

Zoroastrianism is also distinguished from Taoism (chap. 6) concerning good and evil. Taoism claims that manifestations of *Tao*, or “the Way of ultimate reality,” always involve two opposite sides: Yin and Yang, dark and light, death and life, like “The Force” in Star Wars.

Ancient Hinduism also teaches that the supreme Reality, *Brahman*, manifests himself or itself equally as Vishnu the creator and Shiva the destroyer. When *Brahman* sleeps, he becomes Vishnu and dreams a world into being; when he wakes, he becomes Shiva and destroys the world.

Basic Tenets

In contrast to all of these, most of the basic tenets of Zoroastrianism are strikingly similar to those of the three major Abrahamic religions:

1. There is one omniscient and omnipotent God (“Ahura Mazda”), who is “truth” or “light” and perfect moral goodness. Evil does not originate with him.
2. God created first invisible (spiritual) worlds and then the visible (material) world.
3. The invisible world contains a hierarchy of spirits to rule the creation and to guard mankind. These are called gods, so Zoroastrianism is often labeled a polytheism, but these are more like angels, made by God to do his work.
4. From primeval man came the first man and woman, from whom all men are descended.
5. Human beings are created good. They share God's spiritual nature.
6. Evil has infiltrated the material world, but matter is not evil. The origin of evil is Ahriman, an evil spirit.
7. We have free choice. Life is essentially a battlefield between good and evil.
8. There is life after death, when spirits, which are immortal, leave bodies.
9. God judges all choices justly after death, rewarding the good with an eternal heaven and punishing the evil with an eternal hell. Heaven is joy, which comes

from the light of God. Hell is darkness, misery, and punishment from evil spirits. There is also a purgatorial waiting period between death and the Last Judgment, where we receive a vision of every thought, word, and deed we chose during life.

10. Zoroaster is only one prophet among others. The last, Shoshyant or Saoshyant, a messianic savior-figure, will usher in the day of judgment and the final destruction of all evil.
11. Earth and air, and most especially fire and water, are sacred and must be kept pure. Zoroastrians pray in the presence of fire and in fire temples.
12. Contact with impure matter, especially dead bodies, is forbidden. Corpses are ritually exposed to vultures on "Towers of Silence." (This practice is usually omitted today because the nearly extinct vulture population is simply not up to the job.)
13. The three basic moral obligations are to have good thoughts, good words, and good deeds.
14. Like Muslims, Zoroastrians pray five times a day.
15. Ritual purifications, chants, and sacrifices are offered by priests to purify the world and mankind.

There are numerous differences between the teaching of Zoroaster and those of Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad in particulars and in practice, but the similarities are quite striking. Accounting for them is a very interesting philosophical question.