

Review - The History of Philosophy

Written by Karthick Ram Manoharan

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KARTHICK RAM MANOHARAN, APR 30 2020

The History of Philosophy
By A.C. Grayling
Penguin, 2019

One of the few benefits of the 21-day lockdown in India in the wake of the Coronavirus epidemic was that I was able to sit down, focus on, and finish reading A.C. Grayling's *The History of Philosophy*. As bad news from across the world kept piling on, one does wonder if the consolation of philosophy, to take from Boethius, makes sense. Perhaps one could learn from the Stoics. The Stoics, as Grayling explains, were determinists, who believed that what will happen tomorrow has already been decided. To the Stoics, we must master what we can (fear, paranoia etc.) and face with courage what we cannot (illness, age etc.). They were apathetic, in the sense that they did not give into passions. Epictetus, a slave who became a philosopher, emphasized self-knowledge and self-mastery instead. But what is the point of all this if everything is predetermined? For what does human agency count when a non-human microscopic organism is able to wreak global catastrophe? Epictetus believed that if we can do something about the existing state of affairs, then we should and must act. If we cannot, we shouldn't lose our peace over it. To be unfree was to give into passions, 'pathe'. To the Stoics, "Acceptance of inevitabilities is freedom" (p.113). A philosophical perspective may help you to emotionally weather or rationalize a grave crisis. But philosophy is not just about how to live life or why. It is the broadest possible study of life and non-life.

Grayling offers arguably the most diverse overview of philosophy's history till date. This is a book every student of philosophy must have in their collection. Grayling's engaging account of political philosophy, whether it is Hobbes and Mill or Mozi and Han Fei, will also be of great interest to students and scholars of political science and international relations. *The History of Philosophy* does not have the creative intensity of Peter Sloterdijk's *Philosophical Temperaments* (2013) and it may not have the simple appeal of Will Durant's *The Story of Philosophy* (1926), but it makes up for it in its breadth and casts its net wider. Grayling's language is elegant, accessible and he is a good presenter of ideas. Where Bertrand Russell's *A History of Western Philosophy* (1945) had the author imposing himself upon on the writers he covered, Grayling is relatively restrained. Relatively only, because Grayling is not above making reductive comments, and the occasional snide remark, on continental philosophers covered in this book.

Indeed, this book is evidence that the divide, or even hostility, between the analytic and continental traditions is not a matter of the past. Grayling, does have a clear bias to analytic philosophy, which is evident from the space he lends to it and the effortless expertise with which he deals its thinkers and topics. This is not necessarily a serious flaw in itself as such biases are unavoidable when attempting a project of this scale, but the somewhat unfair treatment to continental thought could have been avoided. When dealing with those like Heidegger and Sartre, Grayling could have focused more on their ideas and less on their lives. And while Grayling meticulously registers the significant work of contemporary analytic philosophers, the towering figures of those like Alain Badiou, Etienne Balibar, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Ranciere and Slavoj Žižek (arguably one of the most famous thinkers in the history of philosophy who achieved the status of a global celebrity *in his lifetime*) do not find even a passing mention.

A Diverse History of Philosophy?

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These omissions do not make *The History of Philosophy* a lesser book, just incomplete. But a work like this is likely to be criticized the most for its omissions. Surely, one can expect to find feminist reviewers lamenting the lack of greater space to women thinkers and feminist philosophy, while postcolonialists may find the absence of M.K. Gandhi, Frantz Fanon or Mao Tse-Tung to indicate the author's Eurocentric bias. But before one can accuse Grayling of provincialism, it is worth noting that the author tries to do justice to Indian, Chinese and Arabic-Persian philosophical systems and these sections don't look like token inclusions, but reflect his genuine commitment to make *his* history of philosophy as diverse as possible. These sections, though brief, are reasonably well-informed and despite Grayling's confession that he is "an observer rather than an expert in these fields" (p. 513), they can evince interest in the lay reader to explore them further.

On the other hand, the author flounders when dealing with European (i.e. continental) philosophers from Hegel onwards. I found it hard to understand why Schopenhauer, whose attempts at philosophizing were exercises in orientalist valorization of eastern mysticism, should deserve such positive coverage while a crucial thinker like Søren Kierkegaard is given no space. Defending this exclusion, Grayling says that in thinkers like Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers and Emmanuel Levinas there was a dominant concern for the theological and that this cannot adequately address the problems of philosophy (p. 498). If that were true, why include Aquinas and al-Ghazali at all?

Grayling's survey of ancient philosophy and analytic philosophy is a *tour de force*. Likewise, the sections on the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, modern thought from Francis Bacon to Immanuel Kant are a delight to read. But a particularly intriguing section is the one on African philosophy. He notes a trend in post-colonial Africa to claim that there is a distinctively African philosophical thought and that "folklore, tales, wise maxims, tradition, art and religion express worldviews, and the claim is then added that a worldview is, just in virtue of being one, a philosophy" (p.576). Grayling proceeds with caution in questioning the premises of this claim. Because if this claim were to be taken as valid, the search for philosophy and philosophers would have to extend to the indigenous people in several parts of Latin America, South-East Asia, and Australia, not to mention the lower castes and tribal communities of India. One could also include non-hegemonic groups like the Kurds of the Middle-East and the Tamils of South Asia here. Indeed, thinkers from/communitarian values of several of these groups have advocated a lifestyle that calls for a respect of nature, preservation of ecology, simple and harmonious living, more or less similar to the African concept of *ubuntu*, which is a summation of several humanistic values (p.580).

The race to classify African thoughts and practices as philosophy, if one may observe, is a very recent phenomenon which largely began in, and as a response to, the West. It is an effort to look at African values, oral histories and traditions as philosophical in retrospect. But this quest is not just restricted to Africa. Scholars from/representing subaltern groups from across the world who have entered the humanities in the West have pitched claims to philosophy for several types of works from what they claim are underrepresented communities. It is a testament to the lure of philosophy that even those people who had no need of it for millennia – in the sense that they had no class of thinkers called 'philosophers' nor an organized body of knowledge called 'philosophy' – now want to name the thoughts and practices of their ancestors as philosophical. But the very fact that this happens largely in Western universities, in Western languages, in works published by Western publishers, will ensure that the West will remain the global centre of philosophical research and conversation for a long time to come. The linguist Max Weinreich reportedly said "Language is a dialect with an army and navy." One can imagine a similar flippant statement being made about philosophy – that it is any thought that finds its way into the philosophy curriculum of the Western university!

Who is a Philosopher?

Grayling does not address this in detail, but he leads us into the questions of what is philosophy and who is a philosopher. Philosophers have interpreted the world in many ways. A particularly tough thing however is to define who a philosopher is. Grayling identifies the following as the principal areas of philosophical enquiry in contemporary times – "epistemology, metaphysics, logic, ethics, aesthetics, the philosophy of mind, the philosophy of language, political philosophy, history of debates in these areas of enquiry, and philosophical examination of the assumptions, methods and claims of other fields of enquiry in science and social science" (p.xv-xvi). Even this broad mapping is exclusionary because it does not include the important field of philosophy of religion. But let us assume that a

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philosopher is someone who works on one or more of these fields of enquiry. We can see from contemporary research in philosophy that these fields add more sub-fields within them which change the nature of these fields and also of what has been added to them. In Hegel-speak, this continuous expansion, the internal modification of the components of philosophy, and the external modification of philosophy itself is what constitutes its journey towards absolute knowledge. Our judgments on what is philosophy and who is a philosopher are an essential part of that dialectical process.

In common parlance, philosophy is seen simply as the beliefs of an individual or community or a sum of their attitudes. It is not uncommon to hear of corporate interviewers asking their candidates “what is your philosophy?” By the loose usage of this term, practically anyone could claim to be a philosopher – a yoga teacher, a spiritual guru, the lyricist for a heavy metal band, an opinion columnist, the author of a self-help book and so on. Gramsci argues that everyone does some form of intellectual activity in their lives – they are artists, they have moral conceptions of the world, they are philosophers. “All men are intellectuals [...] but not all men in society have the function of intellectuals” (2009, p.9). Taking from this, one could say that the potential for philosophy is universal, but not everyone realizes their potential for philosophy. So, what makes the philosopher different from, say, the spiritual guru? Sloterdijk says “Philosophers are athletes of conceptual categories” (2013, p.15). We know that becoming an athlete requires rigorous training, discipline and commitment. Perhaps the question if a body of thought constitutes philosophy or not, or whether the enquirer is a philosopher or not, should be assessed by the intellectual strength, intensity and perseverance with which a conceptual category is approached. Many people run – to catch a bus, as an exercise to lose weight, or if chased by a dog. Their running, while it is definitely running, is not the same as that of Usain Bolt and we do not call them athletes.

Reference

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Gramsci, A. (2009) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan.

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