



Russell's History of Western Philosophy

A Digest of Berlin's Review in *Mind*

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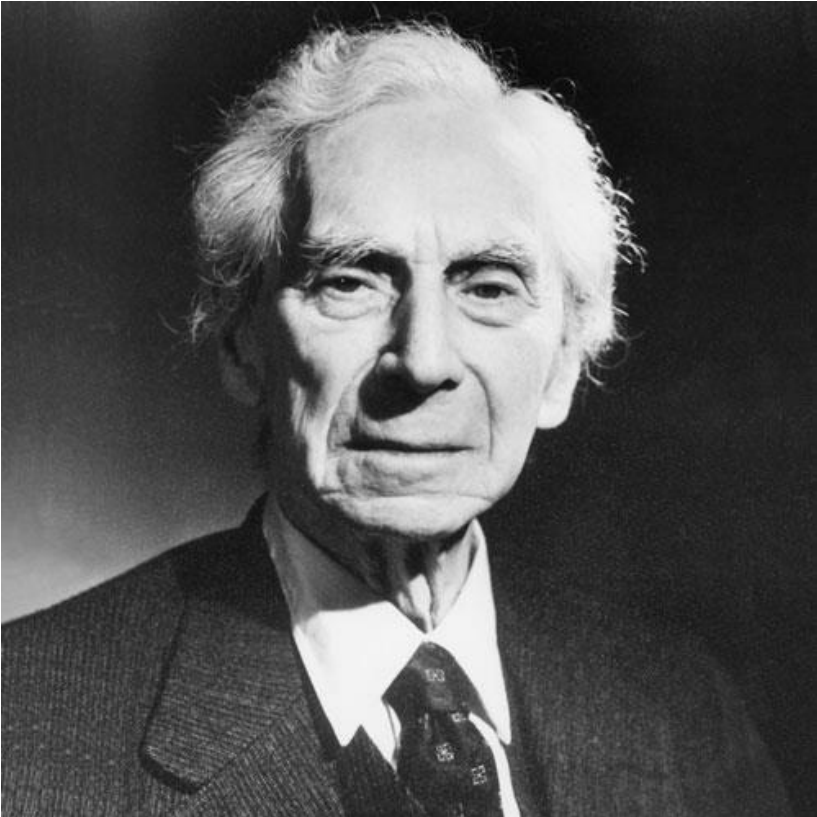
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Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*

'Digest' of Berlin's review of Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* [*Mind* 56 no. 222 (April 1947), 151–66], *British Book News 1947* (London, 1949), 534–5



LORD RUSSELL is one of the most eminent of living philosophers. Indeed, it may be said that no man has had a greater influence in changing the course of modern philosophy. His disciples in the field of mathematical logic and the logic of the sciences, the theory of knowledge, ethics and politics have carried

his doctrines to many lands, and applied them to many different spheres of activity with fruitful and sometimes revolutionary results. Consequently, this history of philosophy is an important event, since in it for the first time he gives his views in a systematic manner of most of the great European thinkers of the past.

The book is divided into three parts. The first deals with ancient philosophers and, since one of its avowed aims is to relate the social and intellectual background of each period to the work of its technical philosophers, it deals with Greek civilisation as well as with the doctrines of the pre-Socratics, Plato and Aristotle; the Hellenistic world as well as the Stoics and Epicureans. His remarks on the progress of science and mathematics, throughout the enormous period which the book covers, and his discussion, from the standpoint of deeply liberal and rationalist convictions, of such topics as the influence of Sparta and of the Roman outlook on the ancient and modern world, are particularly illuminating.

Book II deals with Catholic philosophy from the early Fathers to the Renaissance. The author provides a vigorous historical survey of the part played in the history of ideas by the early Fathers of the Roman Church, the Schoolmen, the great Popes, the more important princes and Emperors, and of the influence of the barbarian invasion and of Mohammedan culture and philosophy; his account is full of imagination and colour in that it attempts to recapture the mental climate in which these events and ideas had a crucial importance, very different from the mechanical catalogue of dates and doctrines of which too many histories of philosophies consist.

The third book is devoted to modern philosophy and, after a lively sketch of the Renaissance and a particularly penetrating account of the rise of science and the beginning of modern political ideas in Machiavelli and Hobbes, it gives what is perhaps the best account of the rationalist thinkers, and particularly of Spinoza and [535] Leibniz, in any modern history of philosophy. This is followed by an account of the rise of philosophical liberalism, to which the roots of the author's own thought may be traced. The story is carried on from Locke and Berkeley and Hume to the

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Romantic Movement and to the present day. With considerable originality, Rousseau, Byron, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche are given more space than the more academic philosophers of the nineteenth century, because their influence, even upon professional philosophers, let alone the literature, arts and thought of civilised humanity in general, is, in the author's view, far more profound and lasting than that of the contemporary professors of philosophy. Karl Marx, Bergson, William James and John Dewey are next treated, and the work ends with a brief survey of the philosophy of logical analysis to which Russell himself belongs, and of which indeed he may claim to be the father, if not by now the grandfather.

The book differs from the more orthodox histories of philosophy because it does not profess to cover every thinker and idea as and when it occurs, but prefers to concentrate on those aspects of Western thought which appear to Lord Russell either to be of the first importance in themselves or else to have had a cardinal influence upon posterity. It is without doubt, if only as a piece of literature, the best written and the most arresting history of philosophy since the now obsolete and forgotten history of philosophy by Hegel, and covers a wider span and possesses more originality than any other book of similar scope in the English language.

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