How We Are and How We Got Here
A Practical History of Western Philosophy
Douglas Giles

Real Clear Philosophy
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PREFACE FOR INSTRUCTORS

This book helps students of any age or background learn about the story of philosophy in the Western world. I wrote it to fill the prodigious gap between books that oversimplify philosophy and complex works that are inaccessible to nonprofessionals (and many professionals!). I also want to give instructors of philosophy a textbook option that is affordable and accessible for students and includes important philosophers who are left out of the standard textbooks.

*How We Are and How We Got Here* is a distillation of what my decades of teaching has taught me about how students best learn about philosophy and why it matters. I kept several premises in mind throughout the book, the most important being that everyone can understand philosophy and be a philosopher if given the resources to do so.

How This Book Differs from Standard Textbooks

In writing this book for use in university courses, I wanted to avoid two pitfalls of standard textbooks on philosophy. One is the ridiculous high cost of textbooks that publishing corporations expect students to pay. Second is that standard textbooks don’t adequately give students the resources they need to connect meaningfully with philosophy. These two pitfalls are partially connected.

The overuse of primary texts is confusing to students. Some instructors feel that philosophy is best taught through source material. I respect their choice, but I have seen too many students enter my courses who dropped out of a previous Introduction to Philosophy section in which the instructor threw complex source texts at them and expected them to sink or swim. These students sank and learned little to nothing. These students aren’t stupid, and they aren’t lazy; they weren’t given the tools to succeed.

Therefore, this book is not a “reader.” It is a book that explains the philosophers’ ideas. That is its role—as a guide. I think that the role of a philosophy textbook is to be a secondary resource that helps instructors explain the philosophers’ ideas, so this book references the primary texts without reproducing them. This saves page space for explanation and discussion, while keeping costs down for the students paying for the book. It also gives instructors more freedom to add whatever primary texts they deem fitting. Primary source texts are widely available in the public domain, and I encourage instructors to share them with students as I do in my courses.
Another key difference in this book is its emphasis on recent philosophy. Quite a few standard textbooks focus predominantly on ancient and early modern philosophy, giving students the impression that philosophy was a pursuit of the past. Some “readers” textbooks have recently added to their disjoint approach a few essays more recently written, but not in a coherent way that shows the current directions in philosophy. It is important to show that philosophy is an ongoing conversation that is continuing to engage with current social issues and break new ground.

This book includes philosophy’s current engagement with social changes and real-life concerns and that includes covering current movements in social philosophy, feminist philosophy, and philosophy of race, among other current issues in philosophy. *How We Are and How We Got Here* includes more philosophers who are female, people of color, and nonheteronormative than probably any other textbook, and not as mere box-checking but acknowledging these philosophers’ important roles in philosophy’s effects on society.

### What This Book Covers and Why

An important lesson I have learned from teaching philosophy is the importance of learning philosophy chronologically. Students benefit from learning how philosophy has developed by seeing how philosophers interacted with historical changes, and students gain understanding by appreciating how philosophers build on the ideas of their predecessors.

A historical, contextual approach to philosophy avoids the disconnected and fragmented view offered by topically arranged textbooks. This book shows how throughout history, philosophy connects with real life and our everyday experiences. It looks at philosophy not as an arcane collection of disconnected questions but as an ongoing dialogue in response to real-world problems.

Any book on the history of philosophy invites debate over who and what are left undisussed. What I have tried to do is include the philosophers and ideas most influential to us today. I agonized over many dozens of decisions whether to go into more detail about particular philosophers and ideas. Obviously, I am making a set of value judgments in deciding what ideas are, and are not, significant, and every judgment that I have made is open for discussion. Nevertheless, I think it important to present philosophy to students as something pertinent to their lives and not merely as academic pedantry, so that principle guided my decisions.

This book is targeted to beginning to intermediate students in philosophy. Therefore, it does not delve into many deep details that are worthy of discussion because an analysis of them would not directly
benefit the target audience of this book. The book’s content is designed to help readers understand the basic content of the philosophers’ ideas without confusing or intimidating them with opaque complexities. I have kept in mind the many, many questions that my students have asked over the years about philosophy because those conversations help reveal the issues most relevant to discuss in this book. A very important aim is that this book never talks down to students but includes them in philosophy’s long conversation.

Of course, this book is designed to fulfill most schools’ general distribution requirements. That is why its subject matter is Western philosophy. Philosophy departments need to satisfy the requirements handed down to them by their states and institutions, and, regrettably, non-Western philosophy is not part of those distribution requirements. There is a widespread ethnocentrism in U.S. education that leaves very little room for non-Western knowledge. A recent trend in some standard textbooks is to include a few paragraphs about ancient Chinese and Indian philosophers, but these inclusions serve more as sidebar curiosities. These textbooks give students the false impression that philosophy in China and India stopped more than 2,000 years ago, and I think this does more harm than good. Those two cultures, among others, deserve adequate attention and background in a book much larger than this one.

Also in the service of schools’ general distribution requirements, this book does not cover logic or critical thinking. Most schools cover that material in specific critical thinking or reasoning courses. This book also does not include ethics because most schools teach stand-alone courses on ethics. Leaving out logic and ethical theory allows this book, and courses that adopt it, to spend more of the limited course time on the rest of philosophy.

I very much welcome feedback from instructors on ideas to improve this book. Like philosophy itself, this book is an ongoing process always seeking to be better in addressing the problems of the real world.

Best Regards,
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