

A History of Western Philosophy *From the Pre-Socratics to Postmodernism*

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“When a world-class Christian philosopher writes on the history of Western philosophy, one can expect a first-rate work that illuminates and enriches—and that is just what we find here. Evans’s book effectively distills key philosophical figures and their ideas, considering both their historical context and their lasting influence. What we have in this volume is a marvelous resource that engages key thinkers and philosophical concepts judiciously, insightfully, and Christianly.”

Paul Copan, the Pledger Family Chair of Philosophy and Ethics, Palm Beach Atlantic University, author of *A Little Book for New Philosophers*

Philosophy: No Gimmicks or Hooks Needed

IVP Associate Editor David McNutt sat down with C. Stephen Evans to talk about how philosophy impacted his life and faith and about his new book *A History of Western Philosophy: From the Pre-Socratics to Postmodernism*.

How were you introduced to the study of philosophy? What led to your career-long passion for philosophical investigation?

Evans: I first encountered philosophical thinking in high school when I read C. S. Lewis’s *Mere Christianity*. However, I did not really know what philosophy was at that time, and so I did not see that book as philosophy. So my first real encounter was the summer prior to my freshman year at Wheaton College. We were all asked to read *Education at the Crossroads*, a book by the French neo-Thomist Jacques Maritain. (I cannot imagine any school requiring such a book for incoming students these days!) I read the book but understood almost nothing. Upon arriving on campus, the whole freshman class was required to attend a lecture on the book by the philosopher Stuart Hackett. I understood very little, but it was clear that this man inhabited a world of which I knew nothing, and I was fascinated. So I signed up for a philosophy course with Dr. Hackett. I fell in love with philosophy almost instantly. One of the people we read was Kierkegaard, of course! The next year I took history of philosophy with Arthur Holmes, and I knew I would major in philosophy.

My love for philosophy has many sources. First, the subject matter could not be more important, since it deals with ultimate questions about life and its meaning. Second, the ideas and arguments are intrinsically interesting and thus philosophical thinking and dialogue are frequently just enjoyable. Finally, I could see from the very beginning how valuable philosophy was in helping people see the importance and truth of Christian faith.

In your many years of teaching at different institutions, what have you found to be most helpful when introducing students to philosophy?

Evans: I don’t think one needs any gimmicks or “hooks” to introduce students to philosophy. The truth is every human person who is at all reflective has already asked philosophical questions. One only has to help students see that the questions the philosophers are asking are questions they are already interested in. The most important thing is to do this with passion, allowing the students to see how serious and vital the issues are.

Your book is a history of Western philosophy, so of course it features many well-known figures (e.g., Plato, Descartes, Kant, and Kierkegaard), but you also include some lesser-known philosophers (e.g., Thomas Reid and Mary Wollstonecraft). How did you decide who to highlight?

Evans: Of course I did try to include the major figures who have had a great impact on Western culture, and who continue to be read and studied. And I did have to be selective; I have left out many medieval thinkers and even some important modern thinkers, such as Malebranche, a follower of Descartes. However, I also wanted to give extra space to people I believe are truly great thinkers but may be, perhaps temporarily, less well-known. Reid may be in that category, though

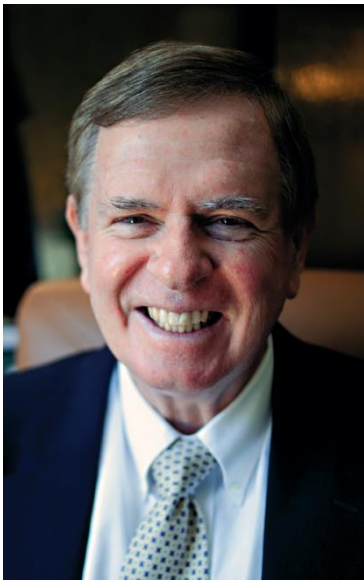


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C. Stephen Evans (PhD, Yale) is University Professor of Philosophy and the Humanities at Baylor University. He previously taught in the philosophy departments at Calvin College, St. Olaf College, and Wheaton College. He has published several books, including *Kierkegaard: An Introduction*, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God: A New Look at Theistic Arguments*, *God and Moral Obligation*, *Why Christian Faith Still Makes Sense*, and *Philosophy of Religion*.

his star seems to be on the rise today. I actually think Reid may be the greatest of all the British philosophers, and almost certainly the greatest writer of philosophy in the English language. Reid was a better philosopher than his contemporary David Hume. Interestingly, almost everyone would have agreed with me about this in the nineteenth century, especially in America. Hume's greater reputation today, in my opinion, is due to his perceived hostility to religious belief, which makes him a kind of prophet to secular intellectuals, who still dominate philosophy despite the renaissance of Christian philosophy. Reid's Christian faith makes him look old-fashioned to such people, though not of course to serious Christians. I included Wollstonecraft not only because she is a very interesting thinker in her own right, but also because her work is increasingly discussed in today's world, which obviously pays more attention to gender issues than was previously the case.

If you were to describe the development of Western philosophy in just a few sentences, what would you say?

Evans: I see Western philosophy as a centuries-old argument or conversation between enduring traditions. In metaphysics there is a continuing argument between materialism and idealism, with theists usually siding with neither. In epistemology there is a continuing argument between empiricists who emphasize experience and rationalists who emphasize a priori reasoning, with skeptics challenging both. There is a continuing battle between realists and anti-realists, people who believe in objective truth and people who see truth as relative and subjective. There is no progress in the sense that one side finally wins and ends the discussion. But there is progress within each tradition; increasingly sophisticated and nuanced versions of the views are developed, and new arguments against rivals are deployed. The arguments never get resolved because in the end they are arguments about how we should live our lives and understand ourselves. This is why it is so vital for Christians to be involved in philosophy and know something about philosophy.

How does your philosophical study inform your Christian faith and vice versa?

Evans: It does this in several ways. First, an understanding of ancient philosophy helps one understand how Christian theology was developed, as expressed in the ancient ecumenical creeds. (I am one of those who, like some of the church fathers, believes that Greek philosophy was one of the ways God prepared the world for the coming of the gospel.) Second, philosophy is a crucial tool for doing theology today, as well as for doing apologetics well. (I am part of a movement called "analytic theology" that draws on the resources of philosophy, theology, and biblical scholarship.)

However, I would say my Christian faith informs my study of philosophy even more than philosophy shapes my understanding of Christian faith. In the book, I try to show how central religious questions are and always have been in philosophy. (In a sense there really is no such thing as "secular philosophy.") I believe that human persons were created by God to know God and enjoy fellowship with God. There is no such thing as religious "neutrality." We are all either faithful servants of God or rebels against divine authority. (And of course perhaps many of us are a bit of both.) That is just as true of philosophers as it is of any other human persons. My Christian faith helps me see this religious dimension in philosophy. In the book, I have tried to emphasize religious elements in the thinking of many philosophers, such as Locke and Kant—elements that are often ignored in standard textbooks, but which were crucially important to the philosophers themselves.



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