

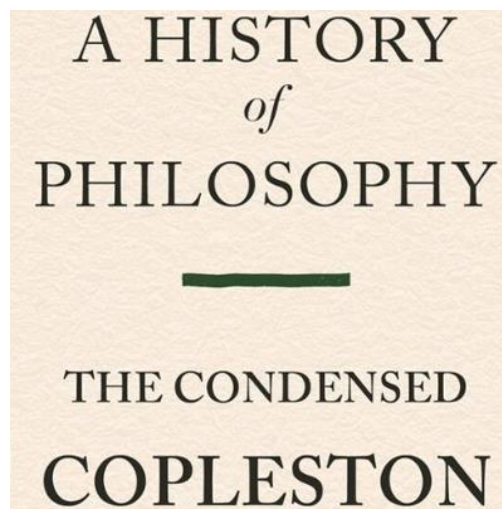


Frederick Copleston and the history of philosophy

Anthony Carroll

Among the many notable achievements of the twentieth-century Jesuit philosopher, Frederick Copleston is his celebrated project, *A History of Philosophy*. The eleven volumes of that work have been newly compressed by Anthony Carroll, who gives us a sense of the size of the task of producing *The Condensed Copleston* ahead of the book's launch at the London Jesuit Centre on 27 February.

Frederick Charles Copleston was born in Somerset in 1907 into a distinguished Anglican family that had its ancient roots in Devon. He converted to Roman Catholicism in 1925, whilst still a pupil at Marlborough College, Wiltshire; an event which, he notes in his *Memoirs* published in 1993, caused considerable dismay to his family at that time. After studying classics at Oxford University and a short period at the diocesan seminary of St Mary's Oscott, he entered the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in 1930 and was ordained priest in 1937 at Heythrop College, Oxfordshire. For most of his life in the Jesuits, he taught and wrote about the history of philosophy both in England and in Italy at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome. He is widely known for his 1948 [BBC Third Programme radio debate](#) with Bertrand Russell on the existence of God, and his 1949 debate with his friend, A.J. Ayer, on logical positivism and the meaningfulness of religious language. 1970 to 1974 saw him as the first principal of Heythrop College after its constitution as a full member of the University of London. Elected a fellow of the British Academy in 1970, his honours and awards also include becoming an honorary fellow of his *alma mater*, St John's College, Oxford, in 1975, and being appointed CBE in 1993. He died in London on 3 February 1994.



Copleston's *A History of Philosophy*, which since 2003 has been published as an eleven-volume collected work by Continuum-Bloomsbury Publishers, has set the standard for a thorough, lucid and balanced account of the history of philosophy in the Western world. It has become a classic in the field and countless generations of students, thinkers and teachers of philosophy are indebted to him for it. The dust jacket of the volumes even

suggest it to be one of the greatest single-handed scholarly achievements of the twentieth century.

Copleston's A History of Philosophy

The eleven volumes of *A History of Philosophy* cover Western philosophy from the ancient Greeks up to the early second half of the twentieth century, and also include a fascinating volume on Russian philosophy. As a whole, the work represents the results of Copleston's forty years of concentrated intellectual enquiry into philosophy and its history. By any standards it is a remarkable achievement, and it sets out in historical and systematic terms – as Professor Hans Joas of the Humboldt University in Berlin has recently noted in commenting on my condensed version – just 'what reasonable, open-minded and fair argumentation can achieve'. In times

such as ours, which are increasingly polarised, Copleston's work demonstrates the power of philosophy to cast light on the complex and multi-faceted adventures of human life lived in different societies and cultures. Balanced, critical and open to a wide range of approaches to understanding these complexities, it portrays the various philosophical accounts of the relations between our determined 'being-in-the-world' and the *consciousness* of our freedom from this determinism, as owing to the different emphases placed upon these fundamental aspects of human existence.

As Copleston notes, such interaction between the conscious identity of a self, given with an awareness of freedom, and the experience of being influenced by determined changes through our 'being-in-the-world', sets in motion 'a dialectical movement, a recurrence of certain fundamental tendencies and attitudes in different historical shapes', which are reflected in distinct philosophical traditions such as idealism, empiricism and realism.

His own approach to this adventure was deeply influenced by the thought of Thomas Aquinas, as were those of his fellow Jesuits, the so-called Transcendental Thomists such as Pierre Rousselot, Joseph Maréchal, Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan. As Copleston proceeded with the series, this Thomistic approach was gradually set within the broader context of the emergence of the modern world with its growing opposition between faith and reason. In conveying the story of the development of modern philosophy and its at times hostile reactions to religious thought, he depicts the emergence of both religious and non-religious approaches to philosophy with the evenhandedness that has made his work a paragon of fair-minded philosophical investigation. In this sense, his account of the history of philosophy overlaps with the recent philosophical work of the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who in his 2018 *Also A History of Philosophy*, views the mutual learning processes between religious and non-religious philosophical thought as having provided unique opportunities for philosophy's development.

Condensing Copleston's *A History of Philosophy*

The work of condensing the major ideas of *A History of Philosophy* into one compact volume obviously required some criteria of selection. I found that as I worked through the volumes, motifs appeared that allowed me to uncover these criteria in the work itself, and knowing something of Copleston's Jesuit background was also immensely helpful. The criterion noted above, that certain philosophical tendencies and attitudes recur in different historical patterns or shapes over time, was particularly useful in marshalling the large amount of material into a single volume. So, for example, whilst questions concerning the relations between unity and plurality, parts and wholes, or the 'one' and the 'many' (as the Ancient Greeks called these relations) are present throughout the history of philosophy, the way in which these are represented in different periods and places varies. He indicates in his 1980 *Philosophies and Cultures* and 1982 *Religion and the One: Philosophies East and West* why he used this dialectical criterion as an organising principle for *A History of Philosophy*. Here he explains that he wanted a way of both assessing how different types of philosophy could be helpful for human understanding and flourishing, and also for discerning in what ways growth in these approaches might be measured according to their comprehensiveness and logical coherence in accounting for the fullness of human experience.

Condensing Copleston's *A History of Philosophy* also enables a clearer understanding of it as one of the most significant scholarly contributions of Ignatian humanism to the twentieth century. This Ignatian orientation is unsurprising because the work is deeply informed by the Jesuit style of doing philosophy. That is to say, it represents a particular approach which is influenced by the tradition of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola and, as John Haldane has rightly observed, is geared towards using philosophy to reflect on the needs and circumstances of human life. In this sense, Copleston's *A History of Philosophy* offers a systematic account of 'philosophical anthropology' — the philosophical approach to understanding and evaluating the overall meaning and significance of humans in relation to the whole of reality in which they are embedded — that shares much in common with contemporary thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas, Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor.

Copleston's expanding philosophical horizons

Copleston's interest in the history of Western philosophy was further broadened by a comparative approach that he took in his 1979 and 1980 Gifford Lectures, published as *Religion and the One: Philosophies East and West*. Here Copleston sought to reflect on the metaphysical status of the categories of the 'one' and the 'many' that permeate both traditions. Following his retirement from Heythrop College in 1974 to 1975, invitations to teach at various universities, including in Hawaii and Santa Clara, gave him more opportunities to pursue these broader interests. The later works which he published during this period of his life demonstrate that the organising principle of *A History of Philosophy* also enabled him to assess the dialectical patterns of similarities and differences that occur in world philosophies other than those of the Western traditions. So, over the course of his life, far from being confined to the parameters of Western philosophy, Copleston acknowledged that the emergence of more adequately researched global histories of philosophy would uncover much that could be used to investigate and assess comparatively the different philosophical anthropologies present within the diversity of world philosophies. This comparative approach enabled him to judge just how various types of philosophy promote or hinder human flourishing in differently overlapping ways to those more recently developed by the three contemporary philosophers noted above.

Modest to a fault and invariably charitable in seeking the best interpretation of each philosopher and school of philosophy that he was examining, Copleston's impartiality became so renowned that Martin Gardner even noted in the *Los Angeles Times*, 12 April 1998, that after reading Copleston, neither he nor anybody else had absolutely any idea of what the author's own beliefs were! Despite this admirable evenhandedness, it is obvious that over the lifetime of his philosophical work, he was clearly motivated by the Jesuit understanding of philosophy as a capacity of reflection and analysis that is given to us so that we might ever better understand and assess how to promote flourishing as individuals, communities and societies.

In a world which is searching for a grammar of healthy approaches to dialogue on often profoundly held differences of opinion, philosophy understood in a Coplestonian manner points in a direction of mutual flourishing. His method better enables us to understand and assess the adequacy of different positions, embodied practices and institutions as to their orientation towards realising traces of what Thomas Aquinas calls the transcendentals — the 'true', the 'good' and the 'beautiful' — in the world. The exemplary witness provided by Copleston's *A History of Philosophy* is that though our differences may at times appear intractable, what unites us in our common quest for human flourishing is in reality much stronger and of greater ultimate significance than what divides us.

Anthony Carroll is a parish priest, lecturer and writer in Andalusia, Spain, and a former senior lecturer in philosophy and theology at Heythrop College, University of London.

[A History of Philosophy: The Condensed Copleston](https://londonjesuitcentre.churchsuite.com/events/3znl6xze) is published by Bloomsbury, and the London Jesuit Centre will be hosting a book launch and presentation on Thursday 27 February 2025 at 6.30pm. Find out more and book to attend: <https://londonjesuitcentre.churchsuite.com/events/3znl6xze>.