

Frederick “Freddie” Copleston’s *A History of Philosophy*

When Robin Baird-Smith at Bloomsbury approached me in 2016 to write a one-volume version of Frederick Copleston’s eleven-volume *A History of Philosophy* (in the Bloomsbury 2003 edition), I was delighted to accept the offer. I had taught the history of philosophy at Heythrop College in the University of London for many years, and, as buying the volumes was one of the first things that I did when I started teaching at Heythrop, I thought, well, at least I have all the books! However, the closure of Heythrop in 2018, a relocation to take up a new job in Yorkshire and subsequently in Spain, meant that the project took longer than initially envisaged. So, I am happy to say that now after eight-years of working on it, Bloomsbury have agreed to publish my efforts in February 2025.

The opportunity to engage with all of the volumes has been a real privilege. As one commentator has noted, this work is one of the great literary achievements of the twentieth century. It covers the history of western philosophy from the ancient Greeks up to the middle of the twentieth-century and also includes a fascinating volume on Russian philosophy. As a whole, the work represents over thirty-years of painstaking intellectual enquiry into the philosophical adventure of human thought. By any standards it is a remarkable achievement, and over the years it has become a standard reference work for teachers and students of philosophy alike.

Condensing all 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 which allowed me to uncover these criteria in the work itself, and knowing something of Fr Copleston’s Jesuit background was also helpful

in this regard. A key criterion that he used to organize the work was that certain philosophical tendencies and attitudes repeat, but in different historical patterns over time. So, for example, whilst questions of the relations between unity and plurality, parts and wholes, or the “one” and the “many” (as Greek philosophy calls these relations) are present throughout the history of philosophy, the way that they are represented varies in different periods and places. He used this criterion as an organizing principle for the work because he wanted some way of assessing how different types of philosophy are helpful for humanity, and how growth in these could be indicated. This criterion allowed him to assess how various types of philosophy promote human flourishing, and later in his life, once he had finished writing these volumes, it enabled him to reach beyond the confines of western philosophy to write about the significance of the philosophies of other cultures and civilizations for this purpose.

Always charitable in seeking the best interpretation of each philosophy that he was examining, Fr Copleston’s impartiality became so renowned that one commentator even noted that after reading the volumes he had absolutely no idea of what the author’s own beliefs were! Despite this evenhandedness, it is clear that he was motivated by the Jesuit understanding of philosophy as a capacity of reflection and analysis that is given to us so that we might better discover how to live well as individuals, communities and societies. Such a fair-minded approach won his *A History of Philosophy* universal acclaim. So, I am deeply grateful that I have been able to revisit the work of one of your illustrious relatives in order to provide a new companion to it. I hope you enjoy it!

Tony Carroll.