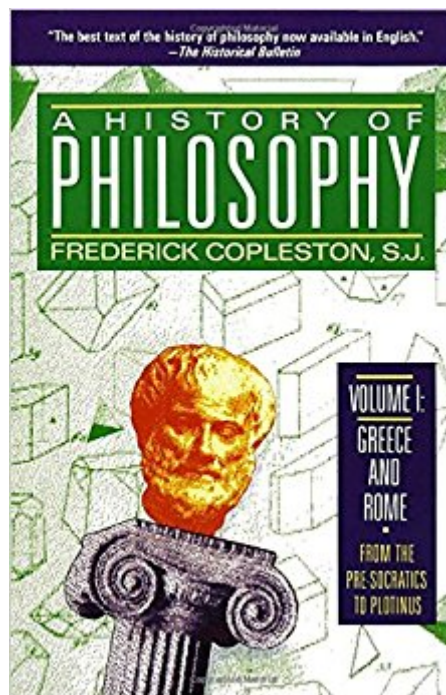




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# A History Of Philosophy, Vol. 1: Greece And Rome From The Pre-Socratics To Plotinus



## Synopsis

Conceived originally as a serious presentation of the development of philosophy for Catholic seminary students, Frederick Copleston's nine-volume *A History Of Philosophy* has journeyed far beyond the modest purpose of its author to universal acclaim as the best history of philosophy in English. Copleston, an Oxford Jesuit of immense erudition who once tangled with A. J. Ayer in a fabled debate about the existence of God and the possibility of metaphysics, knew that seminary students were fed a woefully inadequate diet of theses and proofs, and that their familiarity with most of history's great thinkers was reduced to simplistic caricatures. Copleston set out to redress the wrong by writing a complete history of Western philosophy, one crackling with incident and intellectual excitement -- and one that gives full place to each thinker, presenting his thought in a beautifully rounded manner and showing his links to those who went before and to those who came after him. The result of Copleston's prodigious labors is a history of philosophy that is unlikely ever to be surpassed. *Thought* magazine summed up the general agreement among scholars and students alike when it reviewed Copleston's *A History of Philosophy* as "broad-minded and objective, comprehensive and scholarly, unified and well proportioned... We cannot recommend [it] too highly."

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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This is a great book! It covers most of the early Greek and Roman philosophers in considerably more detail in one volume than other books do. The author provides an informed, honest and unbiased (in my opinion) summary of each philosopher that includes fragments of the philosopher's own works as well as constructive arguments for and against the theories. There is A LOT of detail in this volume! Plato and Aristotle do get much larger sections than other philosophers, but arguably that is right as their contribution to western philosophy was proportionally much more extensive (though not necessarily more significant) than their predecessors. I don't think you could find a better summary of philosophical viewpoints during this time period combined with concise (but detailed) analysis of the respective theories in light of the views of the philosopher's contemporaries as well as more contemporary viewpoints. The author's goal was to create an objective study guide for Catholic seminary students whose philosophical lessons and history were sparse and very

surface level. He succeeded at much more than that! This book is wonderful, the writing style is engaging and the philosophies are presented in a relevant and understandable manner. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in improving their knowledge of western philosophy and their own lives. I have a Degree in Philosophy (sp. Ancient Phil. & Epistemology), I read this book every few years and am always amazed at the immensity of what I missed the last few times I read it. A couple other supplementary texts that you can look into are: "A Presocratics Reader" ed. by Patricia Curd and "The Presocratic Philosophers" by Kirk/Raven/Schofield. These have translations of many of the fragments available from the original philosophers that Copeland writes about. Another book is the two volumes by Diogenes Laertius, who considered himself the biographer of the early philosophers and helped preserve much biographical information about them. The last mentioned is less philosophical on the whole. Also check out all the other volumes in Copeland's History of Philosophy series, they are all equally well composed and exceptionally detailed. I wish I had known about them while I was getting my degrees!

Frederick Copleston wrote his A History of Philosophy with the original intent of instructing Catholic seminarians on the progress of philosophy through the ages. The nine volume work has gone onto wide acclaim and is heralded as one of the best on the topic of philosophical history. This book is the first of the nine volume work and covers Western philosophy from its early beginnings on the Greek islands and onto the rest of the Mediterranean world, expanding into Egypt, Israel, and the Roman Empire. Copleston divides the book into five sections: The Pre-Socratics, The Socratic Period, Plato, Aristotle, and the Post-Aristotelians. The vast majority of the book revolves around the three great classical philosophers: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. The author excels at noting that none of these philosophers was greater than the other, nor did they effectively cancel out each other, but rather built upon existing philosophy. Aristotle, while different in his philosophy, was both an admirer and critic of Plato. Copleston also succeeds in clarifying the philosophies of the Pre-Socratics, whose past can easily be overlooked by the magnitude of Socrates. In A History of Philosophy, the Pre-Socratics are equally as important as the next, each bearing importance to subsequent philosophy. The book is tied together by the referencing of philosophers back and forth throughout. Some minor criticisms are in relation to the author's intent. Obviously, he would have changed the approach had he known the work would go onto greater things. The most obvious downfall of the book is that large sections of text are written in Greek and Latin. For the average Catholic seminarian, this would be no problem. For the layman, it is a challenge. The footnotes are in relation to sources and none of them offer translations. What is especially aggravating is that

Copleston identifies specific terms that are key to understanding a philosophy, many written in Greek and never translated. Many of Aristotle's points were lost on me, since they were written in Greek. This could easily be fixed by a revised edition, providing footnotes and chapter references at the back of the book. One other criticism is the fact that Copleston inserts his own opinions of modern philosophers within the text. This detracts from the non-biased approach that philosophical history should be approached with. He succeeds in noting the successes and failures in philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, yet criticizes Nietzsche and other modernists at the same time. Perhaps the smugness that accompanies his criticisms is due to the fact that many modernists were atheists, and he was writing for a non-atheist audience. Overall, this book is a great introduction to philosophy and is a good springboard for further investigating the philosophers you find interesting.

An excellent source of information on the ancients...perhaps the best.

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