

VOLUME  
INTRODUCTION

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Not too long ago, seminaries and graduate theology programs could take for granted that any entering student would be well acquainted with the major thinkers and traditions of the Western philosophical tradition. Even students who had not majored in philosophy could at least be expected to understand the basic contours of Plato's metaphysics, Aristotle's ethics, or Hegel's dialectic. Teachers of theology and religion could assume this background. However, changes in higher education over the last half century have rendered that assumption problematic. Students often enter seminary with little or no prior experience with philosophy and, as a result, many of the complex questions regarding the relationship of philosophy and theology and the philosophical language that undergirds much of theological discourse become much more difficult to address.

At the same time, access to information about all subjects, philosophy included, has become more and more widely accessible to anyone with an interest. Online resources offer myriad opportunities for a “quick and dirty” perspective on any subject, movement, or idea that one could desire. However, despite improvements in many online resources in recent years, they continue to suffer from issues of “quality control,” which can create misinformation and misunderstanding. Many Christian laypeople who turn to such resources wanting to know more about the history of their faith and its philosophical underpinnings may find them less than helpful without proper guidance.

This volume is intended for such learners, both in the classroom and in the pew. It provides a broad overview of the main trends of Western philosophical thought and some of the major figures from the ancient period to the postmodern era. While not intended to be a comprehensive or detailed introduction to the history of philosophy, it is intended to

provide the main ideas and overall trajectory of its development over the last 2,500 years. Our hope is that the format of this volume will enable readers to grasp the key concepts of a number of the most influential figures in philosophy and begin to see their relevance to the study of theology.

Given the limitations of space, a number of figures and movements that would have been appropriate for a volume such as this were excluded. Our effort was to focus particularly on those figures who were most influential to the development of theology as it is studied today. Among the challenges that such an approach presents is in providing a balance, not only in terms of historical period and philosophical school, but also in terms of issues of ethnicity and gender representation. We wish we could say that the history of Western philosophy offered ample opportunities to include the voices of women and non-Europeans. Unfortunately, this is not the case, and there is a great deal of critique that can be offered of the entirety of Western philosophy on those grounds. However, when possible we did strive to include voices that did not conform to the white, male, heteronormative default. For the most part, these are found in the sections on twentieth-century and contemporary philosophy, because it has only recently been the case that these voices have been permitted into the fold of mainstream philosophical discourse. Where it was possible to do so, we have sought to highlight those voices.

This volume is a concentrated dose of philosophy, designed to get you started on your own journey of philosophical inquiry and growth. It is not a substitute for going directly to the sources and reading them for yourself, but we hope it will serve as an introduction and a guide, in order to enable you to enter into the philosophical stream without being swept away. Philosophy is an endlessly fascinating subject, which has implications for

every dimension of one's life and faith, and which is in continual dialogue with the Christian theological tradition. Without an adequate grasp of philosophy, it is not possible to develop an adequate grasp of theology. If, in the end, this book excites your intellect and imagination and drives you to explore these issues further, then we will count that as a success. What's more, if this volume aids you in grappling with the philosophical issues that are intertwined with the study of theology, we will count that as a success as well.