

A Little History of Philosophy, by Nigel Warburton

reviewed by [George Dennis O'Brien](#) in the [January 11, 2012](#) issue

In Review

NIGEL WARBURTON

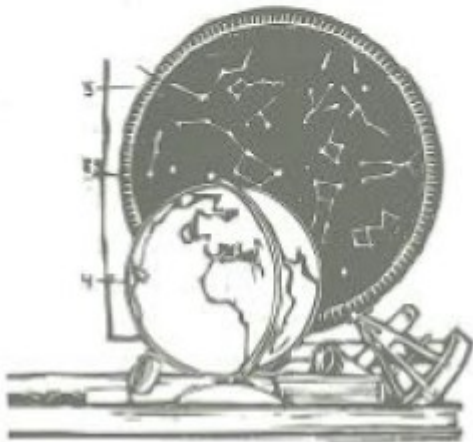
A LITTLE HISTORY



of



PHILOSOPHY



A Little History of Philosophy

By Nigel Warburton
Yale University Press

Nigel Warburton is a senior lecturer for Britain's Open University, a service originated by the BBC to provide education via television to adults who had not gone on to higher education. *A Little History of Philosophy* is focused on that audience and on anyone else who knows little about philosophy except that it is, as Warburton says, "impenetrable and obscure." The aim of his "little history" is to lift the veil of abstraction and convolution that is so often the besetting flaw of philosophy's classic texts. He achieves that aim—but at a price.

Writing any history of philosophy requires two tasks: deciding what thinkers will be included and deciding how their complex works are to be elucidated.

Given that Warburton is presenting only a "little history," his selection of thinkers is certainly reasonable, though some inclusions and omissions will trouble those who are more familiar with the history of philosophy than the book's presumed readers. A philosopher might wonder why Darwin and Freud make it as philosophers, however influential evolution and psychoanalysis have been in science and culture. And what about Hannah Arendt? Is she a philosopher who belongs in the company of Aristotle and Kant?

Most of the philosophers Warburton discusses are relatively modern: more than half the text is devoted to Kant and the philosophers who followed him. Selections in the modern period display a general allegiance to English language philosophy in the analytic style. There is only one chapter on non-English philosophy during the 20th century. It covers Sartre, de Beauvoir and Camus. Heidegger appears only as Hannah Arendt's lover. Warburton gives extended treatment to just three women philosophers, all 20th century. His history of philosophy before 1900 is unrelievedly male.

If the selection of thinkers is defensible because of the brevity of the text, how helpful are Warburton's elucidations? After all, there is no use writing an account of a complex thinker like Spinoza that is more difficult to understand than the original. On that score, Warburton's focus on topics that connect with common concerns beyond the classroom is a plus. His themes are "appearance and reality, the nature of the self, questions about God's existence, and how we should live, both individually and as members of society." Given those topics, he can skip the rough going of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and concentrate on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, with its discussion of happiness as the goal of life.

In the exposition of his chosen topics, Warburton is at pains to avoid the tendency of philosophers to ramble on as if all wisdom needed to be packed into a single interminable sentence. He writes short sentences in which subject and predicate are in tolerable proximity. You may not agree with every philosopher Warburton discusses, but at least you can see what the philosopher is getting at.

Philosophy cast in short sentences has its limitations. Such brevity may suggest that philosophy can be judged by its conclusions, absent the philosopher's mode of presentation. Boiling down a philosopher's work to doctrine presents philosophy as offering clear truths that are roughly comparable to truths of fact and science. But philosophy is more method than conclusions. Philosophers uniformly avoid straightforward discourse in favor of elaborate modes of indirection. The Socratic dialogues were interpersonal conversations in the marketplace. Kierkegaard published essays under fictional pseudonyms. Nietzsche conjured the myth of the superman. Wittgenstein philosophized *viva voce* in agonizing sessions with select attendees. Warburton notes some of these literary quirks but does not connect them to what each philosopher managed to accomplish.

Warburton's discussion of the philosophical treatment of the existence of God is an example of his failure to appreciate modes of presentation. Consider Anselm's ontological argument: since God is a perfect being, God must exist because it would be less than perfect not to exist. Warburton registers the usual philosophical rejection of the argument. That is well and good, but if you go to Anselm's *Proslogion*, you will discover that the ontological argument was offered within something like a prayer to the very God whose existence Anselm was presumably proving. That should strike the reader as strange and raise the question: Just what was Anselm doing? The simplest answer is that he was doing theology, and for that reason, philosophy in the argumentative mode Warburton presents may fail to engage Anselm's text.

If there is a problem with how Warburton presents philosophy, there is also a minor problem with his history of philosophy. A history of philosophy usually traces influences and lines of argument. By that criterion, the philosopher who historically and argumentatively followed Bertrand Russell is Wittgenstein, who studied with Russell and whose *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* demolished Russell's views—much to the latter's despair. Instead Warburton moves from Russell to A. J. Ayer, whose work, however it is judged, is not in the same league with that of either Russell or Wittgenstein. Warburton connects Wittgenstein to Hannah Arendt's account of the

Adolf Eichmann trial because if Wittgenstein (given his Jewish ancestry) had remained in Vienna, he might have been one of Eichmann's victims.

I would have no hesitation commending Warburton's work to someone whose mind is a blank slate on the subject of philosophy. His selection of interesting topics and his simple writing style makes *A Little History of Philosophy* a charming read. But I doubt that philosophy can really be charming. Wittgenstein was right: "You can't think decently if you don't want to hurt yourself."