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Review of *On the History of Philosophy and Other Essays* by Frederick Copleston

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Book Review of *On the History of Philosophy and Other Essays*, by F. Copleston

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On the History of Philosophy and Other Essays. Copleston, F. Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble, 1979. 160 pp. \$15.00

This is a collection of eight essays by the famed historian of philosophy, six of them previously unpublished. The first two concern the practice of the philosophical historian; the rest loosely group about the theme of the validity of metaphysics. I shall first comment on the most interesting of the second group. "Ethics and Metaphysics: East and West" explores the limits of comparative generalizations about Eastern and Western philosophy. When suitably qualified, statements such as "Eastern philosophy tends to be metaphysically monistic, and thus ethically relativistic" and "Western thought stands fast on the concept of the individual and his value" convey reliable information.

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Copleston believes Eastern thought poses a challenge to Western societies, for its moral vision remains embedded in a metaphysical and religious view of man, while the West has put its concept of the value of the human person in jeopardy in effecting the divorce of fact and value.

In "Some Aspects of Medieval Philosophy" Copleston argues that philosophy had considerably more independence in the Middle Ages than the "handmaid of theology" cliché suggests. While the demonstrability of "sacred doctrine" was always in question, philosophy pursued its interest in formal logic unhindered. And if this predominant interest in logic be viewed as the connecting thread of the whole period, the so-called decline into fideism signaled by thinkers such as Scotus and Ockham can be seen not as a loss of speculative courage, but as the result of a heightened awareness of the need for rigor in "proofs" and a more critical approach to epistemology than the 13th Century evidenced. Copleston's simple point: Aquinas was not the whole of the Middle Ages.

In "The Nature of Metaphysics" Copleston claims that the "craving for generality" which makes metaphysics problematic to some of his contemporaries is but the tendency toward conceptual unification common to all forms of theoretical understanding. Distinguishing between descriptive metaphysics and what he calls "explanatory metaphysics," he notes the former is hardly controversial, while the latter is almost necessarily disputable, for the metaphysical mind moves from the general supposition of the intelligibility of reality up to some Absolute or unconditioned One as a necessary presupposition. Copleston candidly acknowledges the religious significance of such an idea for him, but notes that metaphysics will probably never be placed beyond dispute.

One would expect the two essays on the history of philosophy to be the most interesting in the volume, but the reader who looks for a profound theoretical discussion will be disappointed. For one who has done the whole history of philosophy, questions about method seem academic and tend to be answered by "I did it this way" or "common sense." The first essay raises a host of questions: What is to count as philosophy for the historian? Is argumentation the criterion for distinguishing philosophy from religion? Should a history trace

systematic issues or treat individual "great" philosophers? What about biography and psychobiography? Should the historian merely recount past philosophies or is his task to judge their truth or falsity? Should a philosophy be explained as a product of its culture? Copleston finds himself unable to articulate general criteria for solving these problems; time and again, he retreats to "common sense" and personal preference. Evidently the accomplished historian possesses prudence to a surpassing degree.

A separate essay is dedicated to the problem of a history's objectivity. Here the objectors are the ones in possession of criteria, skeptics (straw men, really) who claim we are unable to separate fact and fiction, who demand an absolute distinction of "data" and "interpretation," or who demand the impossible, viz., the exclusion of the logical possibility of error. Against such extravagant opponents it is indeed easy to answer that data and interpretation somehow meet and illuminate one another in the act of reading, that texts limit the historian's reconstruction, and that, though error cannot be excluded, all historical statements are revisable. One feels that Copleston's answers are unsatisfactory, not wrong, but certainly not justified and fully explained. For, unlike a Gadamer or a Roland Barthes, Copleston fails to explore the "how" and the "why" of his "common sense," of *his* objectivity, and to attend profoundly to what happens when he reads an ancient text.