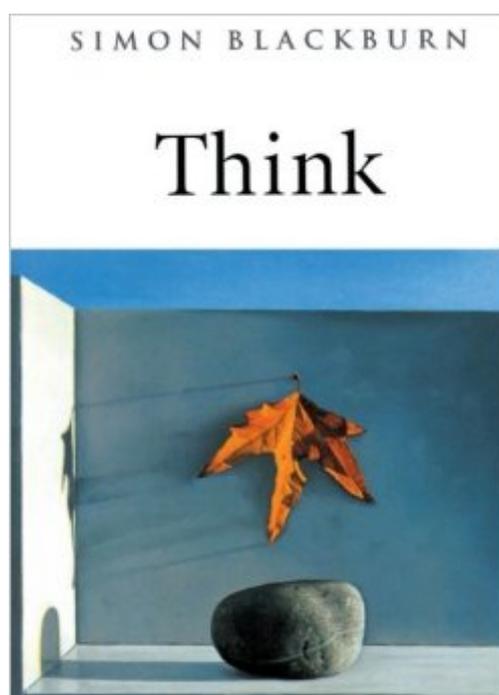


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Think: A Compelling Introduction To Philosophy



Synopsis

Here at last is a coherent, unimposing introduction to the challenging and fascinating landscape of Western philosophy. Written expressly for "anyone who believes there are big questions out there, but does not know how to approach them," *Think* provides a sound framework for exploring the most basic themes of philosophy, and for understanding how major philosophers have tackled the questions that have pressed themselves most forcefully on human consciousness. Simon Blackburn, author of the best-selling *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, begins by making a convincing case for the relevance of philosophy and goes on to give the reader a sense of how the great historical figures such as Plato, Hume, Kant, Descartes, and others have approached its central themes. In a lively and accessible style, Blackburn approaches the nature of human reflection and how we think, or can think, about knowledge, fate, ethics, identity, God, reason, and truth. Each chapter explains a major issue, and gives the reader a self-contained guide through the problems that the philosophers have studied. Because the text approaches these issues from the ground up, the untrained reader will emerge from its pages able to explore other philosophies with greater pleasure and understanding and be able to think--philosophically--for him or herself. Philosophy is often dismissed as a purely academic discipline with no relation to the "real" world non-philosophers are compelled to inhabit. *Think* dispels this myth and offers a springboard for all those who want to learn how the basic techniques of thinking shape our virtually every aspect of our existence.

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Customer Reviews

There seem to be two main kinds of "introduction to philosophy" books out there. The first kind, like Anthony Gottlieb's *The Dream of Reason*, Will Durant's *Story of Philosophy*, and Bertrand Russell's *A History of Western Philosophy*, are not actually introductions to philosophy but introductions to the history of philosophy. After reading several of these I have become convinced that while they have their place, they are not a good introduction to philosophy. When was the last time you took an introductory science class that focused on the history of science rather than science itself? The second kind of introduction is unfortunately much rarer. This kind attempts to explain the ideas that philosophy attacks and some of the arguments surrounding the various theses. Anthony Flew's *Introduction to Western Philosophy* is one of these (unfortunately it also suffers from a perverse desire to keep some kind of chronological narrative and is far too dense for an introduction). Simon Blackburn's *Think* is yet another. I think this is a much more fruitful approach for someone actually interested in an introduction to philosophy rather than merely learning how to drop names at parties to sound educated. *Think* has much to commend it. It clearly delineates a number of key topics. It attempts to show a back and forth of the various ideas held on these topics. For the most part, the writing is light, the explanations easy to understand. There are a number of brief excerpts from actual source material along with commentary on them to help us understand what is meant and how it might fit in to the modern world. Blackburn starts with Descartes and the modern age of philosophy rather than boring us with page upon page of medieval or ancient philosophy that is almost impossible to understand in an introduction to philosophy because of the sheer amount of context such material requires to be understood. The downside is that Blackburn, despite his protestations to the contrary, doesn't do a very even handed job of presenting differences of opinions. He is quite clearly an atheist of the liberal English analytic school. Even if you agree with his positions -- and I do for the most part -- you still wish for a slight more equitable treatment in an introduction. This bias informs most of his commentary; there is a lot of Hume and virtually no Kant, and no other German idealists at all. I understand that the book is a slim volume and cannot be comprehensive, even as an introduction, of the various schools of modern philosophical thought. However, Blackburn spends far more time defending his favorite points of view than he does ones he disapproves of; the chapter on God is the most egregious example of this. However, as long as the reader uses some critical thinking I think the book is still useful as a KIND of introduction. With the caveat that the reader doesn't stop here and instead continues on to learn more about the viewpoints Blackburn gives short shrift. Perhaps there is no such thing as a perfect one-book introduction to a field of study like philosophy. There are few other smaller complaints about the book. The chapter on logic was one of the weakest. The explanations were often hard to follow.

Only inductive logic is mentioned, despite the predominant role deductive logic has had for the past several thousand years (again, I think this is an example of Blackburn's bias showing). The final chapter, however, was by far the weakest. It was almost entirely Blackburn's personal opinion. Unlike every other chapter in the book it is devoid of references to major philosophers and excerpts from their works. It feels completely out of place given the rest of the book. Also it would be nice if Blackburn had given a recommended reading list. After all, if he has done his job the reader should now hunger to read more about philosophy. But where to go? Are we to dive straight into the source material? But which Locke do we start with? Or perhaps Kant comes first? There is no guidance from Blackburn on this relatively important issue for the self-guided neophyte. In all, this is a decent introduction, if not a great one. Its strongest point is that it is easy to read, which is a very strong point indeed in an introduction to philosophy.

Neither a history of philosophy nor a dry, scholarly work, Simon Blackburn's book will appeal to those who have some knowledge of the subject and want an up-to-date primer on the big questions in philosophy. Using references to and quotations from the 'big names', Blackburn nevertheless ensures that the topics are always related to real life (including a hilarious reference to Microsoft when discussing the Problem of Evil), showing both the contemporary relevance of philosophy, and the current 'consensus' on the topics in question. A must read for non-philosophers interested in philosophy, or anyone interested in rejecting the 'unexamined life'.

I was looking for a "primer" on philosophy...who said what, when and so on. Though this wasn't the book I was looking for, I found it engrossing and interesting. After trying to wade through Durant's pompous prose in "A Story of Philosophy," Blackburn's straightforward style was very refreshing. Like a good novel, I couldn't put it down and sometimes jumped to the end of the end of a chapter just to peek at the author's conclusion. Blackburn never really gave definitive answers to life's great questions, but that made it even more satisfying. For a novice, like myself, the terminology was a little confusing and I'm still not sure who was associated with what school of thought (I wish I had had his dictionary to read along with this), but it left me wanting to know and read more.

Blackburn takes a different approach to introducing philosophy: rather than provide a chronological survey (a la Will Durant) or a cartoon-&-sidebar summary (a la the Dummies and Idiot books), he focuses on eight of the most important philosophical problems and invites the reader to work through them, with the author's help and guidance from some of the leading thinkers in the Western

tradition. He is by and large successful in this effort, pitching his discussion to the "intelligent" beginner. By the end of the book, you have both observed philosophers at work and taken a crack at philosophy yourself.

Blackburn has written this book as a defense of philosophy as a practical tool for making sense of the world in which we live. To be perfectly frank making sense of the world is a relatively difficult task. Rather than discuss the history of philosophy Mr. Blackburn turns his attention to the topics of philosophy: Does free exist, is there a god, how do we know what we know. Over its two thousand year-history, the philosophical tradition hasn't come a long way toward answering these big questions. What it has done, however, is give thinkers methods for revealing obvious fallacies in a whole range of arguments. "Think" is designed to give the general reader access to some of the methods and ideas developed by thinkers from Descartes onward. What the book does not do is give the reader any prefabricated answers to these Big questions. Mr. Blackburn is less interested in giving us the answers than he is in showing us how to approach the questions. Although he occasionally offers his own opinion, he is careful to show that there is no easy way to access philosophical truth.

This is a thoughtful, easy to follow book introducing some of the major topics of philosophical thought. The author does not go into a great deal of depth on any particular area, and mixes his own interpretation and opinions in with that of the greats. This makes for an easy read and successfully perked my curiosity to find out more. If you want a solid, thorough treatment of the topic you would be best looking elsewhere. On the other hand, if you are interested in some of philosophy's big questions and need something to ponder then this is an enjoyable read.

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