



From Socrates to Sartre: The Philosophic Quest

T.Z. Lavine

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A challenging new look at the great thinkers whose ideas have shaped our civilization

From Socrates to Sartre presents a rousing and readable introduction to the lives, and times of the great philosophers. This thought-provoking book takes us from the inception of Western society in Plato's Athens to today when the commanding power of Marxism has captured one third of the world. T. Z. Lavine, Elton Professor of Philosophy at George Washington University, makes philosophy come alive with astonishing clarity to give us a deeper, more meaningful understanding of ourselves and our times.

From Socrates to Sartre discusses Western philosophers in terms of the historical and intellectual environment which influenced them, and it connects their lasting ideas to the public and private choices we face in America today.

From Socrates to Sartre formed the basis of from the PBS television series of the same name.

From Socrates to Sartre: The Philosophic Quest Details

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Avijit Sarker says

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Manab says

[illegible]

Tohid hadinejad says

[illegible]

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

WRITTEN PENDING A REVIEW:

Sometimes it's easier to write a song than to read (and understand) Philosophy...

The Philosophers' Song

Though **Plato** drank lots of expensive red wine
He could faithfully draw a Divided Line,

Work a Tripartite Soul into his story
And turn a Cave into an Allegory.

René Descartes knew when it was time to drink
He could not be, unless he was fit to think
Skepticism led to Self-Evident Truth
And a World with Mechanical Attributes.

Young **David Hume** was a well-meaning critter
The Empiricist learned, after a bitter,
It's not Logic that guides all of our Actions
Reason itself is a slave of the Passions.

The Ideal form of a red wine and bagel
Appealed to German philosopher **Hegel**
While all History is Dialectical,
His Spirits were Phenomenological.

Revolutionary vision made **Marx** see red
So much so that Hegel was turned on his head
And Dialectical Materialists
Revolted, forever, German Idealists.

Jean Paul Sartre defined Existentialism
As the ultimate form of Humanism
He proved he was capable of Joie de Vivre
By not asking Simone de Beauvoir to leave.

METAPHYSICAL GRAFITTI:

Monty Python - "The Bruces' Philosophers' Song" [Live at the Hollywood Bowl]"

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_WRFJ...

Monty Python - "Philosophy Football: Germany vs. Greece" [Live at the Hollywood Bowl]"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ur5fGS...>

Thanks to Kris for reminding me about these performances.

Male Philosophy Student and Metaphysical Poet Seeks Indie Girl with Bob Haircut

I think, I hope
That I could be
What you long for
In a lover.

AN APPENDED REVIEW:

The Position of the Mission

I read this book as part of a private mission to acquire an historical context within which to do some more focused philosophical reading.

I never studied philosophy as a discrete subject or course. Instead, my background was in political philosophy and ideology.

I studied Modern Political Thought and the Theory and Practice of Marxism.

Later, I did some undergraduate studies in Semiotics through the French Department, which also gave me some access to Structuralism.

Modern Political Thought was Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau. Marxism was Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Mao and various Euro-Communists.

I now feel frustrated that I only ever read Hegel through the eyes of Marx.

One of the goals of my mission is to better understand Hegel with a different set of eyes. Another is to better understand the implications of Marx turning Hegel on his head.

But ultimately, I wanted to understand how both Hegel and Marx fit into the History of Western Philosophy, including the period since Marx' death.

I didn't choose this work by Lavine for any reason other than the fact that I found a second hand copy for \$4.50.

This is half the cost of a good glass of wine or beer, but I gained a lot more pleasure out of this book (and I still get to have a drink).

The Form

The title of the book says something of its scope. However, in truth, it's a bit misleading.

Sixteen philosophers feature in the overview, only six of them have sections dedicated to them, and Socrates isn't one of them.

Here is the list, with the six in bold:

Heraclitus, Parmenides, Socrates, **Plato**, Aristotle, **Descartes**, **Hume**, Kant, **Hegel**, **Marx**, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, **Sartre**, Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein.

Fans of Philosophy or Monty Python might quibble about the choice or the on-ground time of members of this squad, but ultimately I really enjoyed this primer.

The Substance

Up until the sections on Sartre and the back three, Lavine summarises the tenets of each philosopher's work in an accessible manner, but also in a way that builds a 1,200 year narrative out of intensely conceived and projected philosophical memes.

The book isn't just a personal race, an individual marathon, but a relay, with philosophers passing the baton across decades and centuries, until Lavine, their proxy, reaches us and places the baton in our hand, from which point, we're supposed to think and be and do.

Maybe this analogy is a bit artificial, one that Lavine might not have related to, but her achievement has been to turn what could have been a dry topic into something that a larger audience could relate to.

In other words, if you're a literary reader who's happy to skim la crème de la crème, this isn't a bad place to start.

The Spirit Leveller

My main reservation is the sections on Sartre and contemporaneous trends like Logical Positivism and Analytic Philosophy.

Up until Sartre, she structured each chapter in short succinct paragraphs, often with numbered arguments.

When she arrives at Sartre, the paragraphs are longer, as if she has swallowed, but not digested, and just regurgitated, material that she did not personally relate to.

Synthesis

So for me, this book is a great overview of philosophy up to Sartre in the sense that he built on both Kierkegaard and Marx, but we will need to supplement it with something else that deals with subsequent movements.

Further Reading

I might start here:

A Hundred Years of Philosophy

AN UNPENDED REVIEW:

Homo Logico-Philosophicus ("The Philosophic Conquest" or "The Attractatus of a Man for a Woman: A Thesis in 33 Sexual Propositions")

1. In the beginning, there was a Man.
2. Because there was nothing much else around or in his head, he was surrounded by Empiricism.
3. Just when Man had got his head around Empiricism, a Woman turned up.
4. From his dick, the Man heard a word, and the word was Lust.

5. When asked to put this thing there, the Woman had no logical reason to object.
6. The Man thought he had discovered the Good Life.
7. The next morning, there was a new word, and the word was Love.
8. The Man said, "What do you mean, Love, look at this. Why don't you do that thing that you did last night?"
9. The Woman taught Man the meaning of Negation.
10. In a moment of weakness, the Woman later taught Man the meaning of Persistence.
11. Nine months later, a baby girl was born to the Woman.
12. Tragically, three months later, the baby died.
13. After much grieving and blaming, the Man decided that, if there was an Effect, there must be a Cause.
14. The Woman said, "Hmmm?" and folded her arms inquisitively.
15. The Man thought that, even though the Effect was Visible, the Cause must be Invisible.
16. The Man decided that the Cause must be something Perfect and that all People must be Imperfect.
17. People must be Bad and this other thing must be Good.
18. The Man suggested that the Good Thing should be called God and that God would be a Man.
19. The Woman objected, because she was a Good Thing and, up until then, the Man had called her a Goddess.
20. The Man consulted other Men, and decided to establish a Church that could defeat the arguments of the Goddesses.
21. In time, the Church oppressed not just Women, but Men as well.
22. Men started to question the existence of God and the authority of the Church.
23. Some Men wondered whether they should respect and worship Women instead of God.
24. "Don't be fricken stupid," said their male friends.
25. Men started to believe in one thing and one thing only, and that was their Consciousness.
26. Women looked at these Men and said, "What about us, what about the kids, what about real life?"
27. The Men said, "You do not exist. I am complete, unto myself."

28. The Women looked at each other and said, “I told you they were fricken stupid.”
29. One of the Women said, “If we wait, maybe they will come around to our point of view?”
30. The other Women looked at her and said, “Are you fricken stupid?”
31. One of the Women said, “I think it’s time for some Music.”
32. One of the other Women said, “Do you think that we can sort this out while the Music is playing?”
33. All of the other Women looked at her and said, “Are you fricken stupid?”

Image: André Carrilho, New York Times

THE PHILOSOPHY OF LOVE

Turning Your Back on Love

Love is not an express concern of Lavine, although it is something I started to wonder about as I read the book.

The earlier Philosophers were concerned with ethical questions about how to live a Good Life and how to be Happy.

Even now, if we want to think about these issues, the thoughts of the early Philosophers are just as valid and influential as they have been at any point in history, perhaps because it’s not possible to improve on what they said.

Possibly because they did their job so well, the concerns of Philosophy appeared to move on.

An early concern was the relationship between the Individual and God (or the Gods).

Similarly, the relationship between the Individual and the State became a concern.

Ultimately, the area of Philosophy which has attracted the most academic interest and continued to change or develop the most has been Metaphysics, which concerns the nature of Being and the relationship between the Individual and the World.

One reason for the developments was the influence of scientific theories and discoveries on the concept of Mind.

I Have Only My Self to Blame

My reading of the Philosophy described by Lavine was that it became increasingly abstract and focused on individual Consciousness, almost to the point of Solipsism (the belief that only your own mind is sure to

exist).

Within this framework, there is only the Self, and Consciousness reigns.

The focus of Philosophy seems to have become the Self, in isolation.

Relational Philosophy

What has fallen by the wayside is any philosophical interest in relationships between the Individual or Self (on the one hand) and God, the State and other People (on the other hand).

Even Ethics seems to have perished, because the Individual has become the source of all value in substitution for Society.

I, the Individual, need only act in my own self-interest.

So, what has gone missing is any philosophical interest in Love and/or what I will call Fraternity (or Social Harmony), the relationship between People.

“We” have ceased to be of interest to Philosophy, only “I” am its concern.

What follows below are some speculative extrapolations on the views of the key Philosophers discussed by Lavine.

Descartes

While reading Lavine on Descartes, I felt that he was too analytical and was determined to place concepts and things in boxes.

At the risk of oversimplifying Descartes, what seemed to be missing was the relationship between the separate concepts or things or boxes.

While he still used a concept of cause and effect, there was no sense of dynamism.

There was no sense that sunburn is the reaction of one thing (the skin of the Self) to another thing (the sun).

Hume

By the time you get to Hume, the sensory takes over. Except that it becomes almost an over-reaction to the lack of relationship in Descartes.

The relationship between two concepts or things is all. The sensory is all.

What is missing in the case of Hume is the Self or the “I”.

Hume almost seems to argue that there is no ongoing “I” or Self or Ego, that we are constantly changing packages or buckets of sensory reactions or relationships.

I am what I feel. I feel therefore I am.

Except the "I" is different from the "I" of Descartes.

There is no sense of myself with which I can identify with.

So at this point in Lavine, something in me wanted to put the "I" back in the Self or Identity.

We are not just an aggregate of reactions or relationships.

There is a Self and there is an Other. There is an I and there is a You.

There is You, I and our Relationship or sensory experience of each other (of Each Other).

In other words, there is Love, but it is Love between two discrete People.

Descartes focussed on boxes. Hume focussed on sensory experience.

The synthesis is to come up with heart-shaped boxes that relate to each other.

Philosophy must make room for Love.

Hegel

By the time we get to Hegel, the relation of one Individual to another starts off as a Master and Slave Dialectic, the ultimate Stranger Danger, in which the two engage in a Struggle unto Death.

There is no sense of two warriors raising their open hands in a gesture of peace or two people falling in love at first sight.

The relationship is intrinsically suspicious and antagonistic. The two are a Negation of each other.

The exception for Hegel is the Family, in which the Individual is a Member, as opposed to an independent person.

Love, within the Family, is the Mind's feeling or sense of its own Unity.

This sense of Unity or Oneness is something that the Individual cannot have in the broader Community.

Marx

Marx describes Love as a passion that undermines Tranquility.

Yet, he also seemed to view mutual Love as a condition that should be aspired to:

"If you love without evoking love in return — that is, if your loving as loving does not produce reciprocal love; if through a living expression of yourself as a loving person you do not make yourself a beloved one, then your love is impotent — a misfortune."

Sartre

Sartre sees Love in similar negative terms to Hegel.

In all relationships, we either enslave the Other or the Other enslaves us.

Lavine's section on Sartre finishes on this note, although in the final section on the Contemporary Philosophical Scene she analyses Sartre's conversion to Marxism as an embrace of the social and an attempt to find a form of Humanism in Existentialism.

It's interesting that, when France was occupied by Germany and the French people were oppressed by the German forces, Sartre turned to a philosophy of Fraternity and Engagement to help overthrow the Germans.

Making Our Own Way From Negation to Elation

The remainder of the book discusses Logical Positivism and Analytic Philosophy.

It is more overtly concerned with developments in the understanding of the working of the Mind and Consciousness.

Thus, it retreats from concepts that hint at, or would allow us to construct, a Social Philosophy and a Philosophy of Love.

Because these are not central concerns of Lavine, we never get to hear what she would have thought about these concepts, at least not in this book.

So, we are left alone, on our own, together.

We have to create our own Philosophy of Love.

My Love.

PHILOSOPHY FOR LEMONHEADS:

Musical Interlewd:

It's impossible to understand Philosophy in the 21st century without being intimate with the lyrics of Evan Dando of the Lemonheads.

But first, check out these songs:

"Being Around":

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNvXRJ...>

"Big Gay Heart":

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1Fybv...>

"It's About Time":

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3B0CS...>

”Bit Part”:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ca6N9F...>

See what I mean, now how am I going to refocus you on Philosophy? Well, with a Glossary, only this is no common or garden variety Glossary.

A Glossary of Country and Western Philosophy (According to Evan Dando with a little help from Gram Parsons)

Bodyism

“If I was your body, would you still wear clothes?”

Boogerism

“If I was a booger, would you blow your nose?”

Exhibitionism

“I’m just trying really hard to make you notice me being around.”

Hedonism

“I don’t need you to suck my dick or to help me feel good about myself.”

Logical Positivism

“If you can find a way to add it up, it might be hard, but it might be enough.”

Negativism

“ Nobody, nobody has got no one to go to.”

Nihilism

“They always go bye the bye. The great big no. The great big no.”

Objectivism

“Why can’t you look after yourself and not down on me?”

Rationalism

“I’m just trying to give myself a reason for being around.”

Relativism

“It's about time.”

Sado-Masochism

“I'd be grateful, I'd be satisfied.”

Solipsism

*“Take a look into some big grey eyes and ask yourself
You wanna make 'em cry?
Lookin' out of them it's just as well
But you're gonna live to see I'm gonna ask you why.”*

Utilitarianism

“Do you have to try to piss me off just 'cause I'm easy to please?”

PHILOSOPHICAL DIALOGUE WITH A FRIEND:

Friend:

Philosophy is the art and science of understanding the Invisible.

DJ Ian:

If you can't see it, how do you know it exists? How do you know it's there?

Friend:

Philosophy is like friends. The absence of a friend does not mean that they are not there or that they are not your friend.

Sextus Propertius:

Always toward absent lovers, love's tide stronger flows.

DJ Ian:

Thanks, Sextus...Sextus? Are you still there? Sextus?

Sextus Propertius:

Yes, Ian. Calm down, I'm still here. I just had my headphones up a bit loud.

DJ Ian:

What were you listening to?

Sextus Propertius:

R.E.M. I really love that band.

SOUNDTRACK:

R.E.M. - "I Believe" [from the album "Lifes Rich Pageant"]

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=umIMoy...>

Buzzcocks - "I Believe"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmGvG7...>

Magazine - "Thank You (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin)"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hfTqrQ...>

Magazine - "Believe That I Understand"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=...A Hundred Years of Philosophy>

Beatles - "All You Need is Love"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4p8qx...>

THE LAST OF THE GREAT METAPHYSICAL POETS

Beatles - "All You Need is Love"

Lennon/McCartney

Love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love.
There's nothing you can do that can't be done.
Nothing you can sing that can't be sung.
Nothing you can say but you can learn how to play the game
It's easy.
There's nothing you can make that can't be made.
No one you can save that can't be saved.
Nothing you can do but you can learn how to be you
in time - It's easy.

All you need is love, all you need is love,
All you need is love, love, love is all you need.
Love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love.

All you need is love, all you need is love,
All you need is love, love, love is all you need.
There's nothing you can know that isn't known.
Nothing you can see that isn't shown.
Nowhere you can be that isn't where you're meant to be.
It's easy.
All you need is love, all you need is love,
All you need is love, love, love is all you need.
All you need is love (all together now)
All you need is love (everybody)
All you need is love, love, love is all you need.

A Trainspotter's Guide to the Beatles Video

At 2:22, we see the back of a beautiful shirt. At 2:39, we see who is wearing it.

PLATO? ARISTOTLE?? SOCRATES??? MORONS!!!

The Princess Bride - Battle of Wits

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H6iUg2...>

Ramy Youssef says

As the name shows. It is a Philosophic Quest. In case this will be your first philosophical book, then I will recommend to read, Sophie's World first.

Rushabh says

What a great book. Highly recommended for everybody who wants to start understanding western philosophy. The book is a great for beginners like me, giving both a brief overview of the philosopher's work and the philosopher himself. Great movie dialogues can be found to be seated on the great works of philosophers.

Joker's "you die a hero...." can be found to be from Hegel's theory of thesis and anti-thesis.

Would love a similar tour de force on Eastern and oriental philosophy, recommendations are welcome :)

Bahjat Fadhil says

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Linda says

Thelma Lavine died about a week ago, and I realize that this book by one of my favorite professors was not included on my Goodreads list. Both her inspiring philosophy of lit class that I took at GW and her pbs series about this book are marked indelibly in my memory. A great teacher has left our midst but not our hearts and minds.

Scott Harris says

One of two texts from my Philosophy class. The readings on Plato's Divided Line & David Hume alone make it worthwhile.

John says

A great reference for beginners in philosophic inquiry.
It was very readable and filled with information and clarity. The primary philosophers addressed here are Plato, Descartes, Hume, Hegel, Marx and Sartre. However the contemporaries of those just mentioned are presented with great detail as well.

It is a book that should be read in high school. My opinion is that philosophy should be mandatory curriculum to Juniors and/or Seniors, but I digress, this book certainly educated me on the pervading waves of thought throughout (Western) history.

Owaahh says

Everything you would expect from a compilation of some of the greatest thoughts about almost everything ever recorded...so far.

Katherine Hornsby says

This was exactly the book I was looking for after years of aimlessly reading philosophy and being exposed to it only superficially in school. I was familiar with the thought of a few philosophers and had a very general chronology in my head, but I wanted to start a more serious study by first reading an overview of Western philosophy. This book was exactly that.

There are seven parts: Plato, Descartes, Hume, Hegel, Marx, Sartre, and Contemporary Philosophy. In between discussion of each man's philosophy are details about his life, the conflicts of his time and location, and how his thought both affected and was affected by these circumstances. Lavine transitions from one section to the next by using these details as well as including other philosophers as transitional figures; examples include Kant, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Husserl. This was useful because it provided only the information necessary to understand a transition, but also gave the reader a specific name or movement or ideology to search for later if he or she would like more details.

The end of each section was useful in a similar way, including a list of books relevant to that section for further reading. These lists include both works by the person being discussed as well as books critiquing those works. At the end of the entire book is another list like this, a brief glossary, and an index. The book is also easy to read, obviously made for simple folk such as myself, and conveniently broken into many relatively short chapters, i.e. for those who are busy, it is a good book to read in many short sittings; it is not necessary to sit and read 50 pages consecutively to get an idea as seems to be the case with some philosophy books.

As I said, it was just what I was looking for. I am now using it as a branching off point, and will keep it to reference basic ideas I'm sure I will have forgotten.

Rodrigo says

I've never read a book that synthesizes so well the different philosophic currents that have existed throughout the ages, and somehow manages to keep them valid from a contemporary point of view at the same time.

Thanks to that, I now understand Hume and Hegel much better than I did before. There's also this feeling of urgency that can be perceived as you read, this constant reminder that there's plenty of basis for new philosophies to be born, and that there's even an urgent need for them, since there are only destructive forces nowadays, such as Phenomenology and Linguistic philosophy.

Urgency in philosophy, can you believe that?

The one thing I didn't like about it was how it completely glossed over Schopenhauer, and how it paired up Nietzsche with the Existentialists (those douches).

Edward C. says

So, you want to have a working understanding of Western philosophy, but you don't have the time or energy to read everything that's come out since Plato? Check this book out. Thorough without being overwhelming, the author walks the reader along as though by the hand: difficult concepts are well explained and some light-hearted passages reveal that even philosophers are human.

Nahed.E says

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