

Robinson Philosophy

If philosophy is a swimming pool, a philosopher once remarked, it ‘has no shallow end.’ You have to dive in. Do not be fazed if you are puzzled at first. This is nearly everyone’s experience. The more you read and think and talk about philosophical questions, the less daunting they will seem. The books here are not ‘easy’ books but they are good ways into the subject: they don’t presuppose too much previous knowledge and don’t use technical terms without first explaining them. But there is no one correct way of starting to read philosophy. It is best to find something you understand and enjoy, and work your way to more difficult works from there.

General introductions

Thomas Nagel, *What Does it All Mean?* (Oxford University Press) is one of the best available introductions to the subject by one of the greatest living philosophers. It is extremely short (you could read it all in an afternoon) and written with great simplicity, but gets you right to the heart of the subject in all its difficulty and intensity.

Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford University Press) is a classic work by one of the greatest of all Cambridge philosophers, almost a century old but still readable and interesting to beginners and more experienced readers alike.

Simon Blackburn, *Think* (Oxford University Press) is a longer, more recent book of the same kind by another engaging living philosopher, and a retired member of the Faculty of Philosophy at Cambridge.

Edward Craig, *Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press) appears as part of the excellent ‘A Very Short Introduction’ series, most of which can be recommended as introductions to their topics. Craig is also a retired member of the Faculty of Philosophy at Cambridge.

Nigel Warburton, *Philosophy: The Basics* (Routledge) is a straightforward account of philosophical basics specifically designed to be useful to incoming philosophy undergraduates.

Preparatory work for the Part IA syllabus

If you’d like to get a head-start on the first-year syllabus, you should check out the first-year logic textbook, available for free here: <http://www.nottub.com/forallx.shtml>. Things are set out very simply and clearly, but don’t worry if the going gets hard; you’ll have plenty of support with it once you start at Cambridge.

A very different kind of work on logic is Susan Stebbing, *Thinking to some purpose: A manual of first-aid to clear thinking, showing how to detect illogicalities in other people's mental processes and avoid them in our own* (Pelican). Stebbing, once a student at Girton College, Cambridge, wrote this book at the end of the 1930s because she was worried about the political consequences of unclear thinking. It is easily available in cheap second-hand paperback editions that can be ordered online.

Every undergraduate should read and be aware of the arguments of George Orwell's essay 'Politics and the English Language' (easily available on the internet).

You should also try to read at least one of the four Set Texts: Plato's *Meno*, Descartes's *Meditations* (at least the First Meditation), and John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* and *The Subjection of Women*.

Biographies and Autobiographies

To mention a few among dozens:

Richard Reeves, *John Stuart Mill, Victorian Firebrand* [also see Mill's own classic *Autobiography*]

Ray Monk, *Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* [a rich and vivid portrait of Ludwig Wittgenstein and 20th-century Cambridge philosophy]

Margaret Paul, *Frank Ramsey: A Sister's Portrait* [an intellectually rich account of a great Cambridge philosopher who died young]

Andrew Hodges, *Alan Turing: The Enigma* [on the life and thought of a deeply original philosopher and mathematician]

Marjorie Grene, *A Philosopher's Testament* [an engaging memoir by one of the first female PhDs in Philosophy in North America]

Mary Midgley, *The Owl of Minerva* [the memoirs of a fascinating philosopher and public intellectual]

Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* [reflections on race and identity by a former Cambridge student in philosophy who is now a professor at Princeton]

Bryan Magee, *Confessions of a Philosopher* [the memoirs of a philosopher-turned-broadcaster-turned-politician that doubles up as an introduction to philosophy]

Fiction and drama

Philosophy has been written in a variety of literary forms. Some recommended works from the twentieth century:

Albert Camus, *The Stranger* [a classic work of French existentialism]

Iris Murdoch, *Under the Net*; *The Bell* [fun yet moving novels that engage extensively with philosophical ideas]

Penelope Fitzgerald, *The Gate of Angels*; *The Blue Flower* [short, subtle and deeply insightful novels, the first set in early 20th-century Cambridge and the second in the world of German Romanticism]

Mary Renault, *The Mask of Apollo* [a well-researched and engaging account of ancient Greek history with Plato playing a central part]

Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia*; *Jumpers*, *Professional Foul* [plays about ideas, often very satirical about philosophy and philosophers!]

Unclassifiable works

The boundaries between philosophy and other kinds of writing are not easy to draw. Some works that straddle the boundary between styles and disciplines:

Ved Mehta, *Fly in the Flybottle* [an Indian journalist covers philosophical controversies in the early 1960s for the *New Yorker* magazine]

Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* [a short philosophical dialogue that goes into surprisingly complex territory with great elegance]

Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* and *Regarding the Pain of Others* [reflections on illness and suffering]

Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* [essays on history, culture and literature]

Susan Haack, *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate: Unfashionable Essays* [a philosopher of science takes on controversies in the broader culture]

Zadie Smith, *Changing my Mind: Occasional Essays* (essays on literature, film, politics and literary theory)

Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow* [on whether science and the arts are necessarily at odds]

Ben Goldacre, *Bad Science* [exposing bad scientific and statistical reasoning in news reporting]

A Very Short Introduction to...

In addition to Edward Craig's book mentioned above, there are plenty of books in the same series on specific topics in philosophy. Many of them are excellent: pick anything that catches your eye. A few are listed below:

On historical figures and schools:

Julia Annas, *Ancient Philosophy*

Catherine Osborne, *Presocratic Philosophy*

Christopher Taylor, *Socrates*

Julia Annas, *Plato*

Jonathan Barnes, *Aristotle*

Roger Scruton, *Kant; Spinoza* (by a former student and faculty member at Cambridge)

AJ Ayer, *Hume*

Michael Tanner, *Nietzsche* (another retired Cambridge philosopher)

Christopher Janaway, *Schopenhauer*

AC Grayling, [Bertrand] *Russell*

AC Grayling, *Wittgenstein*

Gary Gutting, *Foucault*

Michael Inwood, *Heidegger*

Sue Hamilton, *Indian Philosophy*

John Marenbon, *Medieval Philosophy* (by a current fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge)

Peter Adamson, *Philosophy in the Islamic World*

On branches of philosophy:

Jennifer Nagel, *Knowledge*
Graham Priest, *Logic*
Stephen Mumford, *Metaphysics*
Samir Okasha, *Philosophy of Science*
Tim Bayne, *Thought*
Susan Blackmore, *Consciousness*
Simon Blackburn, *Ethics*
David Miller, *Political Philosophy*
Roger Scruton, *Beauty* [on aesthetics]