



The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change

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Through network diagrams and sustained narrative, Randall Collins traces the development of philosophical thought in China, Japan, India, ancient Greece, the medieval Islamic and Jewish world, medieval Christendom, and modern Europe. What emerges from this history is a general theory of intellectual life, one that avoids both the reduction of ideas to the influences of society at large and the purely contingent local construction of meanings. Instead, Collins focuses on the social locations where sophisticated ideas are formed: the patterns of intellectual networks and their inner divisions and conflicts. According to his theory, when the material bases of intellectual life shift with the rise and fall of religions, educational systems, and publishing markets, opportunities open for some networks to expand while others shrink and close down. It locates individuals -- among them celebrated thinkers like Socrates, Aristotle, Chu Hsi, Shankara, Wirt Henstein, and Heidegger -- within these networks and explains the emotional and symbolic processes that, by forming coalitions within the mind, ultimately bring about original and historically successful ideas.

The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change Details

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Nicole Bouvrie says

Fascinating book, something I will probably refer to again and again in my future research.

Simon says

I admire the effort. I mean, I can't imagine myself writing a book this long! The work itself, though, seemed to be very superficial in its treatment of philosophers, as if he's only read their biographies and none of their actual works. But don't let that fool you—because, truly, he's only read their biographies and none of their actual works. It's an exemplary case of sacrificing depth for breadth. Collins is like a Benihana chef whose performance is awesome, but whose food tastes... awful.

Dustyn Hessie says

The sheer audacity of this book's mission is worthy of praise.

Unfortunately, our author should have been a little more specific about his aims. What I am referring to is his tendency to use "creativity" in place what should (probably) be termed "large-scale creative influence." There are creative philosophers he didn't mention who have had mightier creativity than many of the philosophers he mentioned in his book. Fernando Pessoa certainly deserves some consideration, seeing as though he has a mightier subjective philosophy than Nietzsche does. Jacques Lacan also deserves mention. Psychoanalysis, as a whole, deserved a lot of recognition....

But, for the most part, I enjoyed it. Definitely the best sociology book I've ever read. The theory is okay; the terms used seem a little botched up; but the writing is smooth and crisp.

Jeremy says

Ok, to be honest I gave out and didn't actually finish reading all of this; skipped/skimmed the last few chapters and still felt like I received a beat-down. An incredibly long, complex sociological history of the great movements in philosophy (and philosophical religion/theology). Apparently Collins researched this book for something like 30 years and his grasp of the different schools of thought is nothing short of astounding; I'm sure there's never been a book produced like it. And that leads to the book's one large fault: his overall thesis, which regards how sociology sheds light on the waxing/waning of philosophical endeavors, tends to get lost in the historical details he presents. Though I'm sure Collins only just skimmed the surface of most of what he talks about, the reader is still left swimming in dozens of (often) unfamiliar names, technical terms, twists and turns of this or that movement.

However, the book does serve as a great history of the important world philosophies.

And there is much to learn here about how great ideas gain prominence and the social conditions that aid

propagation. A good reading strategy for this book would be to read the introduction and one or two chapters on a certain philosophical movement (his chapters on the ancient Greeks and German Idealism stand out) and to read his chapter where he lays out the main components of his thesis (I believe chapter 3).

Richard Anderson says

Full of information you can't find elsewhere. And this is as far as I know a unique way of looking at philosophic systems.

R. says

OK, so I didn't read the whole thing. I read most of the history of western philosophy (skipping medieval and recent French) but not the Asian material and skimmed lightly the sociological chapters.

This is an odd book, and I find it hard to imagine an audience for it. It is purportedly a sociological explanation for the history of philosophy. Though there are a few bells and whistles, the crux of it is that people who make noise for a living seek attention, attention is scarce, some people are better than others at eliciting it, certain kinds of discussions are more likely to attract attention than others, etc. Though I imagine most philosophers would be really offended by all this, I wasn't, because it says nothing about the value of the content of philosophy, and it is in some sense obviously true as far as it goes. The problem is that most of the sociological claims seem rather trite, and none of them forced surprising reinterpretations of the philosophical material itself. The most interesting claim was the link alleged between the rise and fall of Idealism and the movement of modern philosophy into the academy, though the causal mechanism itself was somewhat elusive (and these were among the portions that I read most thoroughly). If my amateur understanding of sociology is right, then this will not seem particularly illuminating to sociologists (unless triteness commands great interest among them, which is possible, I suppose--it is sometimes astonishing what social and behavioral scientists will regard as unobvious). But the lack of revision in our understanding of the history of philosophy, and the appropriate non-engagement with the philosophical content itself, means that there's not much here to interest philosophers. The book, however, has great utility, but for something it is clearly not intended to do: it is a wonderful introductory text sketching the history of philosophy, similar in many respects to Russell's. I have already urged a student to read the chapter on the emergence of analytic philosophy and phenomenology because it is so short, comprehensive and accurate. But I think I was expecting something along the lines of "everything you think you know about philosophy is wrong." Instead I got "it's not what you know but who you know," and I think I already knew that.

Katie says

Some thoughts about thinking. Validated my compulsion to put words in the world.

Peter Mcloughlin says

Very long book outlining intellectual networks and sociology of various intellectual traditions as seen

through these networks. Very nice application of sociology to these networks and comes up with some universals on how Philosophy interacts with the societies and networks from within. by showing both western and eastern traditions the author tries to show how social factors are universal to the enterprise of philosophy no matter the culture. Fairly good and detailed. Spent a lot of time trying to tease out network diagrams a little overkill if you ask me. Fairly good though.

Domhnall says

A huge book and I read every page because it captured my imagination once I got accustomed to the style and approach. The rewards justified the invested time but there were dark periods, especially in the opening chapters.

The book gives a detailed history of the evolution of philosophy in Europe, India, China, Japan, the Islamic world, the modern world and as such risks becoming a list of one damned thing after another. It could be all the more confusing because there is so much repetition and circularity in the story of human thought. The book takes its life from the original way the story is told and is pulled into the form of an interesting narrative because it is continually cross-referenced to an overarching argument about the nature of philosophy and the way it proceeds.

The unique method used is to construct a genealogical tree describing the chains of personal linkages for nearly every significant philosopher to all the others. The links may be positive (teacher - pupil say) or adversarial but they are always significant and the links inform the argument of the text.

If this book was compared to other histories of philosophy, it would be hard to recommend it as a first introduction and it will be much more accessible to people with an existing grasp of at least the outline of both world history and at least the major philosophers. Each significant development in philosophy is described, sometimes with a discussion, but most often in mere outline. In exchange for this loss of detail, the book offers quite a lot of insights by virtue of its particular approach to the topic.

The impression I took from my reading is that philosophy, for all its complexity and its diversity, is also circular and surprisingly repetitious. That does not mean it makes no progress. There is certainly a long term accumulation of knowledge and technique, albeit there are also periods of stasis and regression. Later thinkers often do build their work on traditional sources, but this actually entails borrowing "intellectual capital" with which to proceed to far more ambitious and sophisticated goals. "Conservative" appeals to tradition are invariably original and inventive.

There are constraints and limitations to what is possible, and those constraints - the book argues - arise from the objective, brute reality of the social and natural world in which philosophy takes place as a human activity. There are periodic claims to have made philosophy redundant and "metaphysics" is routinely derided as no longer relevant, but the brave new structures soon reveal their traditional scaffolding and invariably philosophy is called upon to excavate the foundations yet again.

The book describes and explores for each philosophical tradition the social and historical context in which it emerged and thrived. It demonstrates the extent to which ideas are the product of particular circumstances. One cannot predict what particular ideas will emerge in any given situation but one can predict the shape of the options available for thinking and the directions that might prove most fruitful. For example, at a very general level, there are contexts permitting the flourishing of many divergent strands of thought, and contexts

in which that diversity will certainly be pruned and brought together into a coherent synthesis. As another example, there is a discussion of the way monotheism opens up major lines of argument and debate that a polytheist society does not require at all. A final example is the way scepticism emerges repeatedly in predictable scenarios and the role it plays, notably to defend religion.

Describing philosophical history in this way, the book puts forward its own theories about a whole range of developments over time, for example the reason why Idealism was associated with the emergence of modern universities, the reason why Science after about 1700 was so dramatically different to science in the past, the reason why mathematics and philosophy have had such an important relationship over time. In doing so, it takes some truly intimidating names - such as Wittgenstein or Frege say - and cuts them down to a size that is far less frightening. That does not mean that this book is right - half the pleasure of such material is the opportunity to get angry with it, the desire to take out a green pen and write NO across the page. I am not sure yet, for example, what I make of the way Science is depicted. It means, rather, that the book is often totally engaging, brings the material to life and offers original insights into apparently well worn topics.

This is a challenging book and definitely a big one. It is not for everyone and, for most people, it will be sufficient to grab a brief account of its main arguments and a link to the genealogical trees, which can be found on the net.

<http://kevinscharp.com/Sociology%20of...>

But for those with the time who would appreciate a guide to the history of ideas that is genuinely global and wide ranging, this one not only takes us through an immense maze without mishap, but also unravels a continuous ball of string with which to find our way back. (less)

Newsblogger says

He is a very good writer. He even wrote a good novel.

It starts out with a theoretical sociological analysis of interactions between intellectuals and then it is mostly narrative. Warning, 800 pages of sociology, not evaluation of the philosophical ideas.
