

BOOK REVIEWS

One-Hundred Thinkers

Great Thinkers A-Z

Edited by Julian Baggini & Jeremy Stangroom

London: Continuum, 2004. 275 pp.

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Review by Thomas Hallinan

In *Great Thinkers A-Z*, the two editors Julian Baggini and Jeremy Stangroom bring together one hundred “thinkers” from the past 2,500 years. As they readily admit in their introduction to the book, the selected thinkers presented are not to be considered the top 100 *greatest* thinkers of all time: “Our purpose in collecting together these snapshots of the great thinkers is to include all the celebrated names whose place in the canon demands their inclusion, along with an eclectic mix of other thinkers who represent the many styles and strands of philosophy” (1). The introduction goes on to give a rough outline of the development of philosophy starting with Pythagoras and briefly describes the various movements within philosophy (i.e. Theory of Knowledge, Phenomenology, Philosophy of Religion, etc.).

The book is organized alphabetically starting with Theodor Adorno and ending with Ludwig Wittgenstein. Each section devoted to a specific thinker runs between two and three pages and presents an outline of their work along with some very limited biographical information. The editors have included a chronological index and a thematic index to complement the alphabetical arrangement of the presented thinkers. This style allows for a kind of encyclopedic flexibility in reading the text – one could plow through beginning to end or can flip to the specific thinkers one is interested in. The thematic guide included at the end of the book serves to arrange the various thinkers presented under their particular movement, allowing the reader to trace the development of any particular strand of western philosophy.

The editors brought together 63 different authors in order to complete their work. The task handed to the authors was to submit a short summary of the work and thought of these great thinkers which could be easily understood by a non-specialist – therefore there is little technical jargon and

each section reads like a short introduction written for a layman. Typically, each section opens up with some biographical information and a description of the influences and development of interests through the life of the thinker. In the discussion of the thinker any mention of another thinker who is included in the volume is marked in bold, allowing the reader to refer to other sections in order to examine how the thought and work of some thinkers influenced that of others. The bulk of each section is devoted to a summary of the most important ideas associated with the thinker being reviewed. Though the length of each section severely limits the authors' abilities to fully examine the complexities of any given thinker's work, each section typically presents a superficial but easily digestible summary – and, of course, this is the goal of the volume, one which it accomplishes nicely.

As would be expected, certain authors covering certain thinkers are more difficult to comprehend than others – but overall the book accomplishes its goal of bringing together one hundred thinkers and presenting them in a straightforward, easily comprehensible fashion. At the same time, the brevity of each section does not allow for a thorough exploration of any particular thinker's work. The sections tend to focus on the specific contributions that any given thinker is credited with rather than presenting a general overview of the totality of any thinker's entire works. But the goal of the book is to present a wide range of thinkers and ideas rather than focus too intently on any particular individual or school of thought. Each section ends with a short list of recommended readings pertaining to the thinker; usually, the most influential work created by the thinker is listed along with a secondary source recommended by the author in addition to a third recommended reading.

Given the nature of the book, it may be most useful for students of philosophy and other disciplines as a general introduction to many great thinkers. The non-technical language used in the book would allow for any reader, regardless of their previous knowledge on the subject, to read and comprehend the presented information. After having read a section on any particular author, a reader will retain a rough understanding of the most important contributions the thinker has made. In this way, it is very useful as a kind of introduction to some of the most important and influential people in Western society. The more experienced and knowledgeable reader may not find the volume as useful. As previously stated, the summaries are short and serve to present the main ideas and themes in the thinker's work rather than deeply examine them. A reader who has previously studied the

work of any given thinker may not find the section devoted to them to be very useful. For the reader who is unfamiliar with most of the thinkers presented, the volume serves its function well.

Overall, *Great Thinkers A-Z* neatly accomplishes its goal of bringing together one hundred great thinkers and delivering their ideas, contributions, and works in a succinct but useful manner. We see figures such as Plato, Descartes, and Sartre, alongside Einstein and Gandhi. The volume includes a chronological index as well as a thematic guide, allowing the interested reader to follow the development of particular movements, or the historical development of Western philosophy overall. The text reveals the influence of some thinkers on others, the socio-cultural environments each thinker inhabited, and the legacies left behind by the powerhouses. The recommended readings listed at the end of each section refer the reader to the actual work of the thinker in question. This book is likely to be most useful for beginning students of philosophy or for readers who are interested in philosophy but who do not have a very strong background or understanding of the subject. The book does a fine job in tackling the very difficult task of bringing together these very varied and influential individuals in a straightforward and readable fashion.