

Preface

It is sometimes said that philosophy cannot be disentangled from its history, in the sense that the questions and topic studied in the 21st century have their roots and even their language in the past, near or distant. On the other hand, others will treat philosophy as if it is an entirely contemporary concern, with each new book or article arising new-born from the head, if not of Zeus, of its author. In this volume the authors attempt to show by implication at least that both these views are partial. The situation in philosophy today is indeed illuminated by a reflective return to the past, while those past thoughts and thinkers have new light shone on them by being viewed in the context of the way philosophy is conducted today.

The essays in this volume are based on the annual London lecture series of the Royal Institute of Philosophy for 2014–5. They are by philosophers whose distinction is to have made their mark both in their study of some of the great thinkers of the past and in their contributions to contemporary debate in philosophy.

While fourteen essays could not be said to encompass the whole history of philosophy, or indeed the whole universe of philosophical study, many of the key historical figures are here, from Plato to Wittgenstein, from Aristotle to the analytical revolution and twentieth-century pragmatism. Aquinas can be seen alongside Nietzsche, and Plotinus next to Hegel. The key moderns are here too, Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, Hume and Kant. And through the lenses provided by these figures from the past, our contributors range over metaphysics, matter, mind, religion, ethics, epistemology, aesthetics, politics and much else besides, including at the end, the notion of progress itself.

On behalf of the Royal Institute, I would like to thank our distinguished contributors for their lectures and also for their written papers, and I also thank Adam Ferner for compiling the index and for his help with organising the series along with James Garvey, the Secretary of the Institute. Finally, readers might be interested to know that podcasts of the lectures as originally delivered are available on the Royal Institute of Philosophy's website (<http://royalinstitutephilosophy.org/publications/video>).