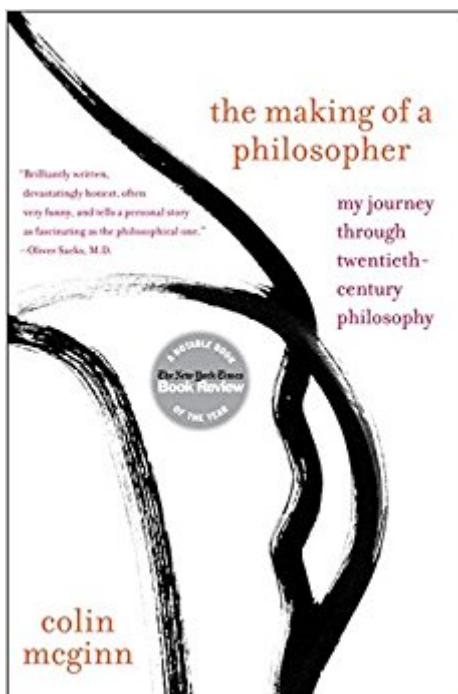


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The Making Of A Philosopher: My Journey Through Twentieth-Century Philosophy



Synopsis

Part memoir, part study, *The Making of a Philosopher* is the selfâ "portrait of a deeply intelligent mind as it develops over a life on both sides of the Atlantic. *The Making of a Philosopher* follows Colin McGinn from his early years in England reading Descartes and Anselm, to his years in the states, first in Los Angeles, then New York. McGinn presents a contemporary academic take on the great philosophical figures of the twentieth century, including Bertrand Russell, Jeanâ "Paul Sartre, and Noam Chomsky, alongside stories of the teachers who informed his ideas and often became friends and mentors, especially the colorful A.J. Ayer at Oxford. McGinn's prose is always elegant and probing; students of contemporary philosophy and the general reader alike will absorb every page.

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Customer Reviews

Philosophers are rarely, far too rarely, given to write a treatment of their field for the general public. Far too many "introductory" philosophy texts claim, in the preface or the intro, that this is a book for neophytes, for philosophical hatchlings waiting to dive off the tree, for "absolute beginners" when, by the third chapter, they're deep into metacognition or technical theories or truth. More often they skim deep subjects, and the skimming only produces useless mist that leaves the beginner dumbstruck and asking "so when do I learn the meaning of life?" This book is thankfully not at the level described above. True, it treats some subjects way too briefly, but it at least does so in a way that will probably whet the appetite, not totally confound. McGinn states his intention clearly in the book (and no, I don't care about "Author's Intentionality" or the "Death of the Author", at least not now) to write a

popular philosophical work. That he has attempted this is admirable. Unfortunately, the most likely reader of this work will be philosophers or academics, which are precisely the people who probably shouldn't read it. Colin McGinn may be "famous" but he's not too famous outside of academia. I have yet to meet anyone outside of "philosophical circles" that's heard of him. The testimony from Oliver Sacks may help, but most likely people looking for more than what's here will pick up the book, be disappointed that it's too cursory, and accuse McGinn of self-congratulation (he is a bit self-congratulatory in places, but one has to make philosophy seem worthwhile while one is attempting to sell it).

This book is both a memoir and yet another introduction to philosophy. McGinn tries to come at introducing philosophy in a different way: through his autobiography and through the issues that prompted his interests in philosophy, the ideas he found interesting as a young man studying philosophy, and what he has thought about at particular times in his career as an academic. The results are rather mixed. You don't get much of substance here, and so you should look somewhere else if you're searching for a serious and comprehensive introduction to philosophy. But this book does cover enough ground to give you a taste of what current academic philosophizing is like. It includes a breezy, straightforward picture of the life of an academic along with brief sketches of lots of interesting philosophical issues. Furthermore, there's not a lot of history covered here; the emphasis is on a few historically important philosophical issues and the more striking arguments and positions that have been defended in contemporary analytic philosophy. So this really gives you an account of what professional life is like for people working in contemporary Anglo-American analytic philosophy, the tradition in which McGinn works. It appears McGinn intends the reader to come to philosophy in the same way he did. We go from the vague, somewhat confused ideas and concerns that first led McGinn to philosophy to immersion in ideas and concerns of current-day professional philosophers. Now, this emphasis on the intellectual development might seem too limited a perspective from which to introduce a subject. But this isn't such a problem here since specialization isn't as extreme in philosophy as it is in other parts of the academy.

As Colin McGinn makes clear up front, this autobiography focuses on his intellectual life rather than his personal life, and his intellectual focus has been on Western analytic philosophy. As someone who once considered a career in academic philosophy, I found this book to offer a fascinating insider's perspective, even if it mainly just represents the perspective of one person. I mostly agree with McGinn's views, and yet I find that most of the work done in Western analytic philosophy,

including McGinn's own work, has been a waste of time. Not that I don't appreciate rigor and clarity (I do), but I find that analytic philosophy largely amounts to abstract hair-splitting which leads to no answers to deep questions nor any wisdom applicable to everyday life; people with an intensely analytic mind are better off applying their energy to math, science, etc. This shortcoming is especially acute in the philosophy of language, where Wittgenstein perhaps said the most that a philosopher can, thus leaving questions related to language best addressed by sociolinguists rather than philosophers. I'll grant that analytic philosophy has perhaps been more useful in the philosophy of mind, which is another of McGinn's major areas, but of course he reaches the negative "mysterian" conclusion that the problem of consciousness may simply be unsolvable by humans. Nevertheless, I still very much like this book, and I didn't mind the quick review of some areas of analytic philosophy. Moreover, the scope isn't strictly confined to analytic philosophy, since McGinn does touch on a bit of psychology, phenomenology, and existentialism early on, and during the 1990s he ventured well beyond hardcore analytic philosophy into areas more relevant to everyday life.

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