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**MASTERING
PHILOSOPHY**

ANTHONY HARRISON-BARBET

M
MACMILLAN

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To my father

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PREFACE

What do you do for a living? If you can say you are a 'bus conductor, plumber, engineer, or secretary, for example, you will be on safe ground. But to call oneself a philosopher, or even a philosophy teacher, is to run the risk of eliciting a variety of uncomplimentary responses. To some people of a conservative, traditionalist, no-nonsense or down-to-earth disposition, philosophers are seen as the supreme exemplars of intellectualism – the term being used pejoratively – and are thus objects of distrust and suspicion: they are regarded as subversives, corruptors of the social order, liable to undermine the moral standards of the nation. To many other people the philosopher is often seen as an eccentric, unworldly figure, the epitome of the absent-minded professor, but for the most part quite harmless. To some 'hard-headed' scientists philosophers are people who ask funny sorts of questions and come up with many different answers – or none at all. Critics of all three kinds tend to concur in the judgement that philosophers are not particularly useful members of society – or are even parasitic on it.

Such extreme and prejudiced views are of course stereotypes and are, fortunately, representative of a minority. Nevertheless among most people there is much ignorance as to what philosophy is all about and why its pursuit may be worthwhile. This is understandable; you no doubt studied maths and English, and perhaps some history and science at school, but it is unlikely that any philosophy would have been included in the curriculum. Your first acquaintance with the subject would usually be at a university or polytechnic, where you would be studying for a degree; or you might be attending a liberal arts or general studies course, of which philosophy is a component. The situation in Britain is thus quite different from that existing in, say, France or Germany, where large numbers of secondary school pupils study philosophy as one of many subjects in preparation for the Baccalaureate or Abitur. Philosophy is, however, available to students in the United Kingdom as an option in the International Baccalaureate; and more recently two examination boards have introduced the subject in the General Certificate of Education at the Advanced Level.

Many people, recognising their ignorance of the nature and value of philosophy, would admit to being curious. It is perhaps such curiosity that has led you to purchase or borrow this book. Or perhaps you have already embarked on a formal course of study and would welcome further guidance. It is for individuals such as yourself, people with a questioning approach to life and a genuine interest in intellectual problems, that *Mastering Philosophy* has been written. There are, of

course, already many excellent introductory text-books of philosophy in print. *Mastering Philosophy* has, however, been written to cater for a wide readership with varying requirements. Attention has been paid both to the texts of a number of major philosophers and to many of the central problems of philosophy. The book should therefore be of particular benefit to students preparing for the A level or International Baccalaureate examinations, as well as to absolute beginners who have no particular examination objective in mind. Teachers of philosophy for liberal arts courses or for the Transition Year in Irish Secondary schools may find it of assistance. It should prove useful also as an introductory text for students working largely on their own towards the London University external BA in Philosophy.

Inevitably there will be weaknesses. Some critics may feel that the ground covered is too wide. Others may regret that this or that philosopher has not gained a mention. But I have endeavoured to achieve a balance between depth and breadth, and have tried to integrate a 'problems' approach to philosophy with the recognition that it has a historical dimension. Students who are required to study set authors for examination purposes have thus also been catered for.

Comprehensive reading lists and a wide range of questions – many taken from examination papers – have been included at the end of each chapter. To assist you further, 'guided' answer notes to selected questions are provided at the end of the book, together with a glossary of technical terms and short biographical notes on the 'prescribed' philosophers. You should find that you are able to tackle most of the questions successfully provided you have studied the relevant sections of the text and the set books, and have thought hard about the issues. Some questions, however, are more testing and presuppose an acquaintance with some of the books or essays listed in the bibliographies under 'Supplementary Reading'.

I am grateful to the numerous (anonymous) publisher's reviewers for their constructive criticisms of the book at various stages of its composition. I alone of course take sole responsibility for the text as it stands. I should also like to express my appreciation to David Hughes, Annabel Greaves and Denia Turnbull, all members of the Runcton Literary and Philosophical Society (Chichester), for their encouragement and for the many enjoyable evenings spent with them in amicable philosophical discussion.

Anthony Harrison-Barbet.