



Sophie or Sophistry?

Article Author:

[Reynold Jones](#) [1]

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Reynold Jones, a professional philosopher, investigates **Sophie's World**.

Sophie's World, first published in 1992, is a book for young adults which quickly established itself as a cult novel throughout Scandinavia, has been translated into 25 languages and sold more than a million copies in both Germany and Japan. Basically, it's a history of western philosophy with a touch of **Alice in Wonderland** ... but just how good a thinker is its author, Jostein Gaarder?

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This book is mainly a history of western philosophy. It starts at the beginning, about 600BC, with Thales from the Greek colony of Miletus in Asia Minor who claimed that everything was made of water. It ends with Jean-Paul Sartre's version of existentialism (Sartre died in 1980) but, inexplicably, Sartre is the only philosopher of this century who is discussed, and there is no mention of Wittgenstein or the 'analytic' brand of philosophy that has dominated universities in English-speaking countries for decades. The book's aim is to introduce people, especially younger people, to philosophy and it has to be regarded as a success. Hundreds of thousands of hardback copies were sold and now the paperback version is outselling every other book in this country. If only a fraction of those who buy or are given the book read it, then Gaarder will have reached an extraordinary number of people with an extremely well-informed and lucid exposition of difficult ideas.

The longest quotation in the book is from St Paul's address to the Athenians; Darwin gets more space than either Plato or Aristotle; there is an exceptionally clear account of the physics developed by Galileo and Newton; the last chapter summarises what modern astronomy knows about the size of the universe, its origin and its future. A conscientious reader will end up knowing what, where and when Hellenism was, what the Middle Ages were between and whether Romanticism came before or after the Enlightenment. And much else besides.

As well as all this, there is a story. Sophie is a Norwegian teenager soon to be 15. She receives, and accepts, the unsolicited offer of a course in the history of philosophy. The offer has come from the mysterious Alberto Knox. Alberto's lessons are the book's history of philosophy. At first it is a correspondence course that Sophie gets but, unfortunately, Alberto is soon instructing her face-to-face. Sophie's responses of 'You don't say?', 'How heavy?', etc. don't do much for the book.

After not very long it emerges that Sophie and Alberto are not 'real'. They discover they are characters in a novel written by a Norwegian major serving in the Lebanon with the UN as a present for his teenage daughter's impending birthday. The discovery is unwelcome and they make a successful attempt to escape from the Major's imagination.

The story is a lot more eventful than this summary has brought out, and there are appearances by, amongst many others, Winnie-the-Pooh, Scrooge and Little Red Riding Hood. But however successful the story is in persuading people to read **Sophie's World**, and keep reading it when the philosophy gets tough, it adds nothing to the book's philosophical content and sheds no light on any of the problems it deals with.

A history of over 2,000 years of philosophy is not the only way in which the subject could be introduced, moreover. Another way, and it is used a lot, is to work through some philosophical problems looking, for instance, at what can be said for and against the belief that human beings, despite our growing understanding of why they behave as they do, can help it? and can, appropriately, be punished for transgressions.

Gaarder's approach also has drawbacks. Here are three. First, when you work through the history of the subject there will always be difficulties, not suitable in an introduction, which cannot be dodged. For instance, the development of philosophy from Descartes onwards is such that no honest account can leave out some of the trickiest bits of the inaccessible works of Immanuel Kant. Sophie has to be told that space and time are 'forms of intuition', modes of our perception and not attributes of the physical world.

We know now, thanks largely to the work of Gareth Matthews, that even young children take easily to philosophy and have a good grasp of problems like how we can tell whether we are awake or dreaming. Sometimes they can even come up with interesting answers like the child who argued that we could be sure we were not dreaming because, if we were, we would not be asking questions like whether we are dreaming. Doses of Kant may not be the best way to develop this talent.

Secondly, while the historical approach does help one to learn a little about philosophy, there is a built-in danger that it may conceal *how* little. Ten pages of **Sophie's World** are about Plato, for example, but his collected works fill 1,600 densely printed pages. Aristotle's thoughts on morality are dealt with in 20 or so lines, while his best known work on the subject runs to over 300 pages in the Penguin edition, each one closely argued.

Thirdly, the historical approach inevitably means that the conclusions of the philosophers overshadow the arguments by which those conclusions were established and defended. A problem-centred approach shows more of philosophy in action. **Sophie's World**, just to take one example, would have given a better picture of philosophy if, in addition to the excellent brief account of Kant's view of morality as consisting of treating people as ends in themselves and not amusing them, that view could have been tested. There sounds something right about it, but doesn't it imply that how we treat animals has nothing to do with morality?

However, if lots of the people who read **Sophie's World** go on to read another book on philosophy, please ignore these reservations!

Sophie's World, Jostein Gaarder, Phoenix, 1 897580 42 8, £16.99; 1 85799 722 0, £5.99 pbk

Reynold Jones is a Lecturer in Primary Education at the Institute of Education, London.

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