The philosophy canon

Following the success of our Life Canon project, which looked at the 10 essential books for flourishing in the modern world, we have produced a series of Canon lists examining the best books in specific topic areas - from history to philosophy. We've already published the well-being canon and the history canon, and now here is the philosophy canon - 10 essential books to help you gain an overview on philosophy.

As before, the list is not meant to be a presentation of the great cultural works of our time, but a set of accessible and interesting books that provide perspective, ideas and inspiration.

If you can't see the list, login or sign up now - it's free and it takes less than a minute to do it!

1. Plato - The Republic (Penguin Classics)
If any book could be regarded as the starting point of Western philosophy, this is it. It explores a range of philosophical issues on the road to exploring what a perfect state or community looks like, as well as the ideal individual within it.

2. Bertrand Russell - History of Western Philosophy (Routledge Classics)
One of the great introductions to the ideas and history of philosophy. A wonderfully interesting book on this important topic.

3. John Heil - Philosophy of Mind: A Contemporary Introduction (Routledge Contemporary Introductions to Philosophy)
An excellent introduction to the philosophy of mind, and a good starting point to any exploration of philosophy generally.

4. David Hume - A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects (Penguin Classics)
This highly readable and influential book attempts to apply scientific methods of observation to a study of human nature. Hume's idea of informed scepticism sees man not as a religious creation, nor as a machine, but as a creature dominated by sentiment, passion and appetite.

5. John Stuart Mill - On Liberty
One of the great books of political philosophy. In it, Mill explores 'the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual'.

6. John Rawls - A Theory of Justice Rev (Paper) (Belknap)
A book that has strongly influenced political philosophy over the last 40 years. Rawls explores the idea of a 'just society' and develops a type of 'social contract' as a way to protect the basic rights and liberties of citizens as free and equal persons.

7. John Gray - Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals
A fascinating, punchy book that might infuriate as much as inspire you. Gray argues against the popular modern humanistic belief in human progress, arguing that humans 'think they are free, conscious beings, when in truth they are deluded animals'.

8. Aristotle - The Nicomachean Ethics (Penguin Classics)
Aristotle, together with Plato and Socrates, is one of the founding figures of Western philosophy. In this book, he explores the nature of happiness.

9. Friedrich Nietzsche - Beyond Good and Evil (Penguin Classics)
In this book Nietzche rejects much of traditional Western thought - from religion to notions of good and evil - and examines the idea of the individual imposing their own 'will to power' upon the world.

10. A.C. Grayling - What is Good?: The Search for the Best Way to Live
A very accessible and readable book exploring ethics and what it means to live a good life, featuring wisdom from thinkers across the ages.