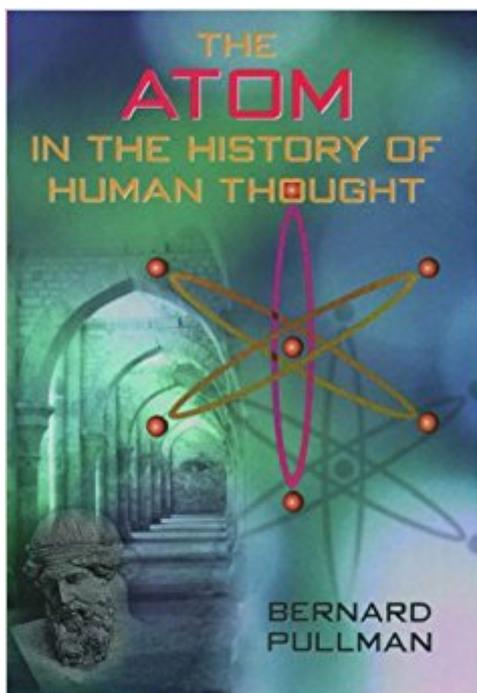


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The Atom In The History Of Human Thought



Synopsis

The idea of the atom--the ultimate essence of physical reality, indivisible and eternal--has been the focus of a quest that has engaged humanity for 2,500 years. That quest is captured in *The Atom in the History of Human Thought*. Here is a panoramic intellectual history that begins in ancient Greece, ranges across the entire span of Western philosophy and science, and ends with the first direct visual proof of the atom's existence, just ten years ago. Bernard Pullman deftly captures the richness and depth of this remarkable debate, giving us not only the ideas of philosophers, church leaders, and scientists, but also the historical and social context from which these thoughts evolved. We have marvelous accounts of the work of such thinkers as Plato and Aristotle, Aquinas and Maimonides, Galileo and Descartes, Newton and Einstein--indeed, virtually every major philosopher of Western civilization, with excursions into the Hindu and Arab world--all presented against the backdrop of history. But perhaps most fascinating is the gradual shift in the book from a philosophical and religious perspective to a scientific perspective, especially in the 19th century, as science begins to dominate how humanity understands the world. Thus a book that begins with pre-Socratic philosophers such as Democritus and Empedocles ends with nuclear physicists such as Werner Heisenberg and Richard Feynman, and with a very different world view. Ably translated by Axel Reisinger, this is a vibrant look at humanity's search to understand the ultimate nature of physical reality, a quest that has spanned the entire course of Western civilization.

Book Information

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could have written this opus on the history of atomic theory AND felt compelled to cite the views of both Nietzsche (the phenomenalist Antichrist) and Marx ("Hadrons of the World Unite"??). To round things out, there's even a quote from Levi-Strauss! To be sure, this is a flawed opus. Published posthumously in 1998 (the author died in 1996), the text has a hurried feel to it, as if compiled from notes by an anonymous editor. As a consequence, the coverage is as uneven as the chapter lengths variable. Chapter 6 ("Principles and Primordial Substances") consists of one very helpful figure with a one-paragraph description, together occupying the better part of a single page. The chapter on "Hindu Atomism" (much touted in the pages of the journal, Science) rightly attributes atomism to the Hindu Nyaya-Vaishishika school. But it neglects the much more prominent place of atomism in Buddhism (with its doctrine of momentariness), devoting only 1/2 page (of 8 total!) to Buddhist thought. In contrast, the chapter on the 20th century takes up nearly 100 pages. On the whole, Western philosophy fares better; yet the hackneyed phrasing of Whitehead's famous quote about footnotes to Plato--"All of Western philosophy is but a long commentary on the writings of Plato" [p.49]--indicates that the translation leaves something to be desired. Still, the work does have its "moments." Part I on the Greek inception of atomic theory, 4 element theory, Platonic/Pythagorean modifications, and the Aristotelean arch-enemy (of undifferentiated substance and divinely impressed form) is excellent, as is Part IV, which focuses on the scientific developments of the 19th & 20th centuries.

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