

THE STORY OF PHILOSOPHY

WILL DURANT



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OF
PHILOSOPHY**

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**BY
WILL DURANT**

**GARDEN CITY PUBLISHING CO., INC.
GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK**

1943

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BY WILL DURANT

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TO MY WIFE

Grow strong, my comrade . . . that you may stand
Unshaken when I fall; that I may know
The shattered fragments of my song will come
At last to finer melody in you;
That I may tell my heart that you begin
Where passing I leave off, and fathom more.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Apologia Pro Libro Suo

I

My publishers have asked me to use the occasion given by a new edition of The Story of Philosophy to discuss the general question of "outlines," and to consider some of the shortcomings of the volume. I am glad of this opportunity to acknowledge these, and to express with all the weakness of mere words the gratitude that I must always feel for the generosity with which, despite so many defects, the American public has received this book.

The "outlines" came because a million voices called for them. Human knowledge had become unmanageably vast; every science had begotten a dozen more, each subtler than the rest; the telescope revealed stars and systems beyond the mind of man to number or to name; geology spoke in terms of millions of years, where men before had thought in terms of thousands; physics found a universe in the atom, and biology found a microcosm in the cell; physiology discovered inexhaustible mystery in every organ, and psychology in every dream; anthropology reconstructed the unsuspected antiquity of man, archeology unearthed buried cities and forgotten states, history proved all history false, and painted a canvas which only a Spengler or an Eduard Meyer could vision as a whole; theology crumbled, and political theory cracked; invention complicated life and war, and economic creeds overturned governments and inflamed the world; philosophy itself, which had once summoned all sciences to its aid in making a coherent image of the world and an alluring picture of the good, found its task of coördination too stupendous for its courage, ran away from all these battlefronts of truth, and hid itself in recondite and narrow lanes, timidly secure from the issues and responsibilities of life. Human knowledge had become too great for the human mind.

All that remained was the scientific specialist, who knew "more and more about less and less," and the philosophical speculator, who knew less and less about more and more. The specialist put on blinders in order to shut out from his vision all the world but one little spot, to which he glued his nose. Perspective was lost. "Facts" replaced understanding; and knowledge, split into a thousand isolated fragments, no longer generated

wisdom. Every science, and every branch of philosophy, developed a technical terminology intelligible only to its exclusive devotees; as men learned more about the world, they found themselves ever less capable of expressing to their educated fellow-men what it was that they had learned. The gap between life and knowledge grew wider and wider; those who governed could not understand those who thought, and those who wanted to know could not understand those who knew. In the midst of unprecedented learning popular ignorance flourished, and chose its exemplars to rule the great cities of the world; in the midst of sciences endowed and enthroned as never before, new religions were born every day, and old superstitions recaptured the ground they had lost. The common man found himself forced to choose between a scientific priesthood mumbling unintelligible pessimism, and a theological priesthood mumbling incredible hopes.

In this situation the function of the professional teacher was clear. It should have been to mediate between the specialist and the nation; to learn the specialist's language, as the specialist had learned nature's, in order to break down the barriers between knowledge and need, and find for new truths old terms that all literate people might understand. For if knowledge became too great for communication, it would degenerate into scholasticism, and the weak acceptance of authority; mankind would slip into a new age of faith, worshiping at a respectful distance its new priests; and civilization, which had hoped to raise itself upon education disseminated far and wide, would be left precariously based upon a technical erudition that had become the monopoly of an esoteric class monastically isolated from the world by the high birth rate of terminology. No wonder that all the world applauded when James Harvey Robinson sounded the call for the removal of these barriers and the humanization of modern knowledge.

II

The first "outlines," the first efforts at the humanization of knowledge, were Plato's Dialogues. The pundits possibly know that the Master wrote two sets of works—one in technical language for his students at the Academy; the other a group of popular dialogues designed to lure the average literate Athenian into philosophy's "dear delight." It did not seem to Plato any insult to philosophy that it should be transformed into literature, realized as drama, and beautified with style; nor any derogation to its dignity that it should apply itself, even intelligibly, to living problems of morality and the state. By the humor of history, his technical works were lost, and his popular works remain. By the irony of history it is these popular dialogues that have given Plato his reputation in the schools.

For us, however, the career of the outline begins with H. G. Wells. The

historians did not quite know what to do with *The Outline of History*; Professor Schapiro described it as full of errors, and a liberal education. It was full of errors, as any book of large scope is bound to be; but it was an astonishing and stimulating performance for one mind. The journalistic genius of Mr. Wells had tied the volumes up with the movement towards international peace, and had entered them as an important team in the "race between education and catastrophe." No one wanted catastrophe, and every one bought the book. History became popular, and historians became alarmed. Now it would be necessary for them to write as interestingly as H. G. Wells.

Strange to say, two of them did. Professor Breasted, of Chicago and Egypt, revised and improved an old text-book, and Professor Robinson did the same; an enterprising publishing firm gathered their work into two handsome volumes, gave them a captivating title—*The Human Adventure*—and issued the best outline of all, a masterpiece of exposition as authoritative as a German and as clear as a Gaul. Nothing in their field has equaled those volumes to date.

Meanwhile Hendrik Willem van Loon had romped over the same ground with a pen in one hand, a pencil in the other, and a twinkle in his eyes. He cared nothing for dignity, and loved a joke surpassing well; he went laughing down the centuries, and pointed his moral with drawings and smiles. Adults bought *The Story of Mankind* for their children, and surreptitiously read it themselves. The world was becoming scandalously informed about history.

The appetite of the layman grew by what it fed on. There were in America millions of men and women who had been unable to go to college, and who thirsted for the findings of history and science; even those who had gone through college showed a moderate hunger for knowledge. When John Macy published *The Story of the World's Literature* thousands welcomed it as a genial and illuminating survey of a fascinating field. And when *The Story of Philosophy* appeared it had the good fortune to catch this wave of curiosity on the rise, and to be lifted to an undreamed-of popularity. Readers were astonished to find that philosophy was interesting because it was, literally, a matter of life and death. They passed along the word to their friends, and soon it became the fashion to praise, to buy, even, occasionally, to read, this book that had been written for a few. All in all it was such a success as no author who has known it once can ever hope to know again.

Then came the flood. Outline followed outline, "story" followed "story"; science and art, religion and law, had their storiographers, and Bekker's slight essay was avidly transformed into *The Story of Religion*. One author produced in one volume an outline of all knowledge, thereby making Wells, van Loon, Macy, Slosson, Breasted and the rest superfluous. The public appetite was quickly satiated; critics and professors com-

plained of superficiality and haste, and an undertow of resentment set in, which reached every outline from the last to the first. As quickly as it had come, the fashion changed; no one dared any longer say a word for the humanization of knowledge; the denunciation of outlines was now the easy road to critical repute; it became the style to speak with a delicate superiority of any non-fiction book that could be understood. The snob movement in literature began.

III

Many of the criticisms were disagreeably just. The Story of Philosophy was, and is, shot through with defects. First of all, it was incomplete. The total omission of scholastic philosophy was an outrage, forgivable only in one who had suffered much from it in college and seminary, and resented it thereafter as rather a disguised theology than an honest philosophy. It is true that in some cases (Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Spencer, Voltaire) the exposition of doctrine was more complete than in most histories of philosophy, regardless of their length. And it is true that the very first page frankly announced:

This book is not a complete history of philosophy. It is an attempt to humanize knowledge by centering the story of speculative thought around certain dominant personalities. Certain lesser figures have been omitted in order that those selected might have the space required to make them live. (Preface.)

Nevertheless the incompleteness remained. The worst sin of all—though the critics do not seem to have noticed it—was the omission of Chinese and Hindu philosophy. Even a “story” of philosophy that begins with Socrates, and has nothing to say about Lao-tze and Confucius, Mencius and Chwang-tze, Buddha and Shankara, is provincially incomplete.¹ As for the word Story, which has since been so abused with use, it was chosen partly to indicate that the record would concern itself chiefly with the more vital philosophers, partly to convey the sense that the development of thought was a romance as stirring as any in history.

No apology is offered for the neglect of epistemology. That dismal science received its due in the chapter on Kant, where for forty pages the reader was invited to consider the puzzles of perception. This chapter should have pleased the young pundit, for it came very near to obscurity. (However, one professor of philosophy, in a Midwest university, sent in the information that he had been teaching Kant for fifteen years, and had never understood Kant’s meaning until he read this elementary chapter.) For the rest, the book suggested unamiably that the nature of the knowl-

¹The first volume of *The Story of Civilization* will attempt to atone for this omission.

edge process was but one of the many problems of philosophy; that this single problem was unfit to absorb the attention which the savants and the Germans had lavished upon it; and that its weary exploitation was largely responsible for the decadence of philosophy. The French have never yielded to this craze for epistemology to the exclusion of moral and political, historical and religious philosophy; and today even the Germans are recovering from it. Hear Keyserling: "Philosophy is essentially the completion of science in the synthesis of wisdom. . . . Epistemology, phenomenology, logic, etc., certainly are important branches of science." (Precisely; they are branches of science, like chemistry or anatomy.) "But it was an unmitigated evil that as the result of this, the sense for the living synthesis should have disappeared." (Creative Understanding, New York, 1929, p. 125.) This from a German—a Daniel come to judgment. And Spengler describes the earlier Chinese philosophers, down to Confucius, as "statesmen, regents, lawgivers, like Pythagoras and Parmenides, like Hobbes and Leibniz. . . . They were sturdy philosophers for whom epistemology was the knowledge of the important relations of actual life." (Decline of the West, vol. i, p. 42.) Doubtless now that epistemology is dying in Germany, it will be exported to America, as a fit return for the gift of democracy.

The Chinese philosophers were not only averse to epistemology, they had an almost Gallic disdain for prolonged metaphysics. No young metaphysician could admit that Confucius is a philosopher, for he says nothing about metaphysics, and less about epistemology; he is as positivistic as Spencer or Comte; his concern is always for morals and the state. Worse than that, he is disreputably intelligible; and nothing could be so damaging to a philosopher. But we "moderns" have become so accustomed to windy verbiage in philosophy that when philosophy is presented without the verbiage we can with difficulty recognize it. One must pay a penalty for having a prejudice against obscurity.

The Story tried to salt itself with a seasoning of humor, not only because wisdom is not wise if it scares away merriment, but because a sense of humor, being born of perspective, bears a near kinship to philosophy; each is the soul of the other. But this appears to have displeased the pundits; nothing so hurt the book with them as its smiles. A reputation for humor is disastrous to statesmen and philosophers: Germany could not forgive Schopenhauer his story of Unzelmann, and only France has recognized the depth behind the wit and brilliance of Voltaire.

I trust that the book never misled its readers into supposing that by reading it they would become philosophers overnight, or that they would be saved the trouble, or pleasure, of reading the philosophers themselves. God knows there is no short-cut to knowledge; after forty years of seeking her one finds "Truth" still veiled, and what she shows of herself most disconcerting. Instead of aiming to be a substitute for philosophers, the

Story explicitly offered itself as an introduction and an invitation; it quoted the philosophers lavishly, so that the taste for them might linger when the book was closed; time and again it prodded the reader to the original texts (e. g., on pp. 22, 67, 121, 289, 331, 425, 438); and warning was given that one reading of them would hardly be enough. Cf. p. 186:

Spinoza is not to be read, he is to be studied; you must approach him as you would approach Euclid, recognizing that in these brief two hundred pages a man has written down his lifetime's thought with stoic sculptury of everything superfluous. Do not think to find its core by running over it rapidly. . . . Read the book not all at once, but in small portions at many sittings. And having finished it, consider that you have but begun to understand it. Read then some commentary, like Pollock's Spinoza, or Martineau's Study of Spinoza, or, better, both. Finally, read the Ethics again; it will be a new book to you. When you have finished it a second time you will remain forever a lover of philosophy.

It is comforting to learn that the sales of the philosophical classics increased some two hundred per cent. after the publication of the Story. Many publishers have issued new editions, particularly of Plato, Spinoza, Voltaire, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. A high official of the New York Public Library, who asks to be unnamed, reports that

ever since the publication of the Story of Philosophy we have had a wide and increasing demand from the public for the philosophical classics, and our stock of them in the branch libraries has been gradually increased. . . . Formerly, current books about philosophy were purchased in small quantities for the system; but in the last two or three years a readable new book about philosophy is purchased very generally at the outset, in anticipation of a demand which eventually does develop, and quickly at that.

Let us not, then, be ashamed of teaching the people. Those jealous ones who would guard their knowledge from the world have only themselves to blame if their exclusiveness and their barbarous terminology have led the world to seek in books, in lectures, and in adult education, the instruction which they themselves have failed to give. Let them be grateful that their halting efforts are aided by amateurs who love life enough to let it humanize their teaching. Perhaps each kind of teacher can be of aid to the other: the cautious scholar to check our enthusiasm with accuracy, and the enthusiast to pour warmth and blood into the fruits of scholarship. Between us we might build up in America an audience fit to listen to geniuses, and therefore ready to produce them. We are all imperfect teachers, but we may be forgiven if we have advanced the matter a little, and have done our best. We announce the prologue, and retire; after us better players will come.

THE STORY OF PHILOSOPHY has been translated into German, French, Swedish, Danish, Jugo-Slavian, Chinese, Japanese and Hungarian. The American edition alone has sold over 548,825 copies.

TO THE READER

This book is not a complete history of philosophy. It is an attempt to humanize knowledge by centering the story of speculative thought around certain dominant personalities. Certain lesser figures have been omitted in order that those selected might have the space required to make them live. Hence the inadequate treatment of the half-legendary pre-Socratics, the Stoics and Epicureans, the Scholastics, and the epistemologists. The author believes that epistemology has kidnapped modern philosophy, and well nigh ruined it; he hopes for the time when the study of the knowledge-process will be recognized as the business of the science of psychology, and when philosophy will again be understood as the synthetic interpretation of all experience rather than the analytic description of the mode and process of experience itself. Analysis belongs to science, and gives us knowledge; philosophy must provide a synthesis for wisdom.

The author would like to record here a debt which he can never repay, to Alden Freeman, who gave him education, travel, and the inspiration of a noble and enlightened life. May this best of friends find in these pages—incidental and imperfect though they are—something not quite unworthy of his generosity and his faith.

WILL DURANT

New York, 1926.

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INTRODUCTION

On the Uses of Philosophy

THERE IS A PLEASURE in philosophy, and a lure even in the mirages of metaphysics, which every student feels until the coarse necessities of physical existence drag him from the heights of thought into the mart of economic strife and gain. Most of us have known some golden days in the June of life when philosophy was in fact what Plato calls it, "that dear delight"; when the love of a modestly elusive Truth seemed more glorious, incomparably, than the lust for the ways of the flesh and the dross of the world. And there is always some wistful remnant in us of that early wooing of wisdom. "Life has meaning," we feel with Browning—"to find its meaning is my meat and drink." So much of our lives is meaningless, a self-cancelling vacillation and futility; we strive with the chaos about us and within; but we would believe all the while that there is something vital and significant in us, could we but decipher our own souls. We want to understand; "life means for us constantly to transform into light and flame all that we are or meet with";¹ we are like Mitya in *The Brothers Karamazov*—"one of those who don't want millions, but an answer to their questions"; we want to seize the value and perspective of passing things, and so to pull ourselves up out of the maelstrom of daily circumstance. We want to know that the little things are little, and the big things big, before it is too late; we want to see things now as they will seem forever—"in the light of eternity." We want to learn to laugh in the face of the inevitable, to smile even at the looming of death. We want to be whole, to coördinate our energies by criticizing and harmonizing our desires; for coördinated energy is the last word in ethics and politics, and perhaps in logic and metaphysics too. "To be a philosopher," said Thoreau, "is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live, according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust." We may be sure that if we can but find wisdom, all things else will be added unto us. "Seek ye first the good things of the mind," Bacon admonishes us, "and the rest will either be supplied or its loss will not be felt."² Truth will not make us rich, but it will make us free.

¹Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom*, pref.

²*De Augmentis Scientiarum*, VIII, 2.