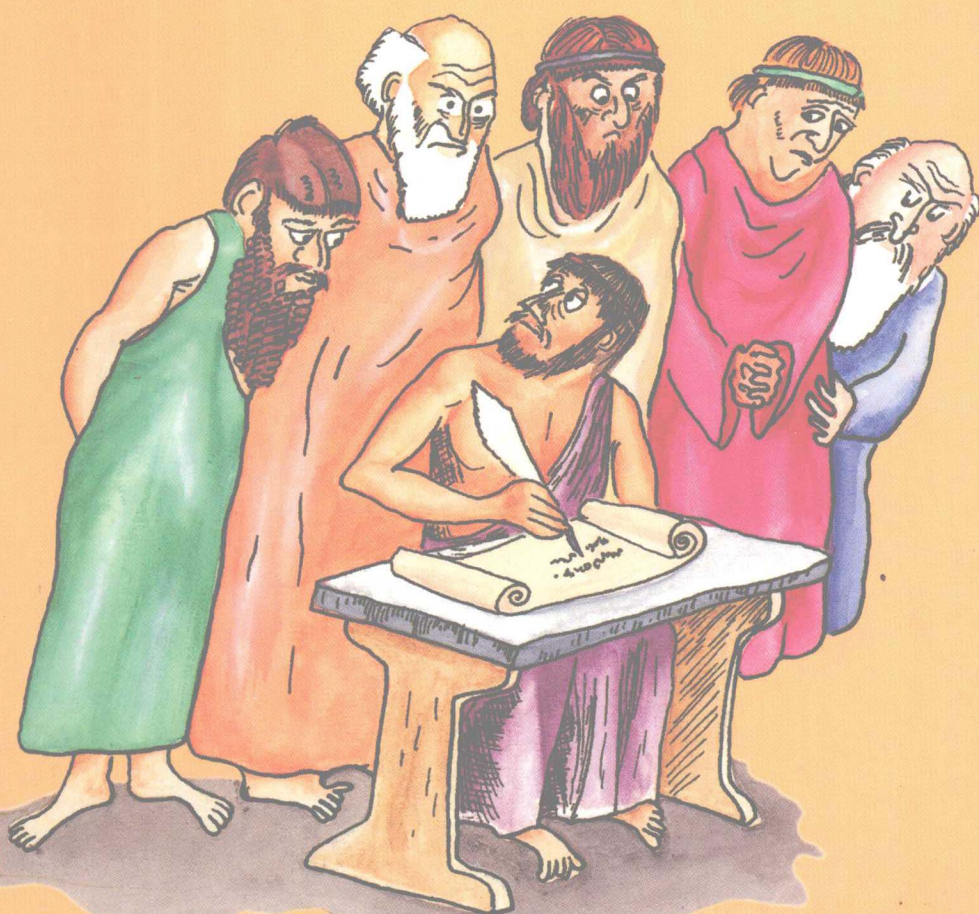


Looking at Philosophy

*The Unbearable Heaviness of
Philosophy Made Lighter*

THIRD EDITION

DONALD PALMER



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LOOKING AT PHILOSOPHY, THIRD EDITION

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

5 6 7 8 9 0 MAL/MAL 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

ISBN 0-7674-0596-X

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Palmer, Donald.

Looking at philosophy : the unbearable heaviness of philosophy made lighter / Donald Palmer.—3rd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-7674-0596-x

1. Philosophy—History. 2. Philosophy—History—Caricatures and cartoons. 3. American wit and humor, Pictorial. I. Title.

B74.P26 2000

190—dc21

00-031032

Sponsoring editor, Kenneth King; production editor, Julianna Scott Fein; manuscript editor, Karen Dorman; design manager and cover designer, Violeta Diaz; text designer and art editor, Robin Mouat; cover illustration, Donald Palmer; manufacturing manager, Randy Hurst. The text was set in 12/17 Tekton by TBH Typecast, Inc., and printed on acid-free 45# Highland Plus by Malloy Lithographing, Inc.

Text Credits: Page 391, from *The Random House Dictionary, Unabridged, Second Edition*, 1993. Reprinted with permission from Random House, Inc.

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Looking at Philosophy

Text and Illustrations

by

Donald Palmer

Preface

Wittgenstein once said that a whole philosophy book could be written consisting of nothing but jokes. *This is not that book*, nor does this book treat the history of philosophy as a joke. This book takes philosophy seriously, but not gravely. As the subtitle indicates, the goal of the book is to lighten the load a bit. How to do this without simply throwing the cargo overboard? First, by presenting an overview of Western philosophy from the sixth century B.C.E. through three-quarters of the twentieth century in a way that introduces the central philosophical ideas of the West and their evolution in a concise, readable format without trivializing them, but at the same time, without pretending to have exhausted them nor to have plumbed their depths. Second, following a time-honored medieval tradition, by illuminating the margins of the text. Some of these illuminations, namely those that attempt to schematize difficult ideas, I hope will be literally illuminating. Most of them, however, are simply attempts in a lighter vein to interrupt the natural propensity of the philosophers to succumb to the pull of gravity. (Nietzsche said that only the grave lay in that direction.) But even these philosophical jokes, I hope, have a pedagogical function. They should serve to help the reader retain the ideas that are thereby gently mocked. Thirty years of teaching the subject, which I love—and which has provoked more than a few laughs on the part of my students—convinces me that

this technique should work. I do not claim to have achieved Nietzsche's "joyful wisdom," but I agree with him that there is such a thing and that we should strive for it.

Before turning you over to Thales and his metaphysical water (the first truly heavy water), I want to say a word about the women and their absence. Why are there so few women in a book of this nature? There are a number of possible explanations, including these:

1. Women really are deficient in the capacity for sublimation and hence are incapable of participating in higher culture (as Schopenhauer and Freud suggested).
2. Women have in fact contributed greatly to the history of philosophy, but their contributions have been denied or suppressed by the chauvinistic male writers of the histories of philosophy.
3. Women have been (intentionally or unintentionally) systematically eliminated from the history of philosophy by political, social, religious, and psychological manipulations of power by a deeply entrenched, jealous, and fearful patriarchy.

I am certain that the first thesis does not merit our serious attention. I think there is some truth to the second thesis, and I may be partially guilty of suppressing that truth. For example, the names of at least seventy women philosophers in the late classical period alone have been recorded, foremost of which are Aspasia, Diotima, Aretê, and Hypatia. (Hypatia has been belatedly honored by having a journal of feminist philosophy recently named after her.) Jumping over centuries to our own age, we find a number of well-known women contributing to the history of philosophy in the first half of the current century, including Simone de Beauvoir, Susanne Langer, and L. Susan Stebbing.

However, no matter how original, deep, and thought-provoking were the ideas of these philosophers, I believe that, for a number of reasons (those reasons given in the second and third theses are probably most pertinent here), none of them has been as historically significant as the ideas of those philosophers who are discussed in this book. Fortunately, things have begun to change in the past few

years. An adequate account of contemporary philosophy could not in good faith ignore the major contributions to the analytic tradition of philosophers Iris Murdoch, Philippa Foot, G. E. M. Anscombe, and Judith Jarvis Thompson, nor those contributions to the Continental tradition made by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Monique Wittig, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. Furthermore, a new wave of women philosophers is already beginning to have considerable impact on the content of contemporary philosophy and not merely on its style.

So, despite the risks, I defend the third thesis. I truly believe that if women had not been systematically excluded from major participation in the history of philosophy,¹ that history would be even richer, deeper, more compassionate, and more interesting (not to mention more joyful) than it already is. It is not for nothing that the book ends with a discussion of the work of a contemporary woman philosopher and with a question posed to philosophy herself, “Quo vadis?”—Whither goest thou?

The third edition has added considerably more material, especially concerning ancient Greek philosophy, medieval philosophy, the philosophy of the Renaissance, and Anglo-American analytic philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century. The Glossary has been expanded, and a section titled “Topics for Consideration” has been included at the end of each chapter.

Finally, I want to say that I have had some help with all three editions of this book. For assistance with the first edition, I am grateful to Kerry Walk and reviewers Job Clement, Daytona Beach Community College; Hans Hansen, Wayne State University; Yukio Shirahama, San Antonio College; and William Tinsley, Foothill College, who read parts of the manuscript and provided helpful suggestions. Donald Porter, College of San Mateo, read the whole thing. He clearly understood exactly what I was trying to achieve and gave me many good ideas for doing it better. For help with the second edition, I am indebted to Dasiea Cavers-Huff, Riverside Community College; Donald Porter, College of San Mateo; Matt Schulte, Montgomery College; and Robert White, Montgomery College. For reviewing the third edition,

I thank Timothy R. Allan, Trocaire College, Buffalo; Will Griffis, Maui Community College; Fred E. Heifner, Jr., Cumberland University; Joseph Huster, University of Utah; Brian Schroeder, Siena College; Samuel Thorpe, Ph.D., Oral Roberts University; James Tuttle, John Carroll University; Stevens F. Wandmacher, University of Michigan, Flint; and Andrew Ward, San Jose State University. I would also like to thank my colleague David Auerbach for having read and commented on parts of the manuscript. Jim Bull, my editor at Mayfield Publishing Company for the first two editions, had faith in this project from its inception. My editor at Mayfield for the third edition has been Ken King, whose insight and efficiency have helped make this edition an improvement over the first two. My thanks to Julianna Scott Fein and Robin Mouat of Mayfield's Production Department and copyeditor Karen Dorman for their expertise. My wife, Leila May, has been my most acute critic and my greatest source of inspiration. She kept me laughing during the dreariest stages of the production of the manuscript, often finding on its pages jokes that weren't meant to be there. I hope she managed to catch most of them. There probably are still a few pages that are funnier than I intended them to be.

Notes

1. See Mary Warnock, ed. *Women Philosophers* (London: J. M. Dent, 1996).

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Introduction

The story of Western philosophy begins in Greece.



The Greek word “Logos” is the source of the English word “logic” as well as all the “-logies” in terms like “biology,” “sociology,” and “psychology, where “logos” means the theory, or study, or rationalization of something. “Logos” also means “word” in Greek, so it involves the act of speaking, or setting forth an idea in a clear manner. “Logos,” therefore, designates a certain kind of thinking about the world, a kind of logical analysis that places things in the context of reason and explains them with the pure force of thought. Such an intellectual exercise was supposed to lead to wisdom (Sophia), and those who dedicated themselves to Logos were thought of as lovers of wisdom (love = philo), hence as philosophers.

What was there before philosophy, before Logos? There was Mythos—a certain way of thinking that placed the world in the context of its supernatural origins. Mythos explained worldly things by tracing them to exceptional, sometimes sacred, events that caused the world to be as it is now. In the case of the Greeks, Mythos meant

tracing worldly things to the dramatic acts of the gods of

Mount Olympus. The narratives describing these origins—myths—are not

only explanatory but also morally exemplary and ritualistically instructive; that is, they provide the rules that, if followed by all, would create the foundation of a genuine community of togetherness—a “we” and an “us” instead of a mere conglomeration of individuals who could only say

def. of mythos



Explaining Ancient Greek Customs

“I” and “me.” Hence, myths are often conservative in nature. They seek to maintain the status quo by replicating origins: “So behaved the sacred ancestors, so must we behave.” Myths had the **advantage** of creating a whole social world in which all acts had meaning. They had the **disadvantage** of creating static societies, of resisting innovation, and, many would say, of being false. Then, suddenly, philosophy happened—Logos broke upon the scene, at least according to the traditional account. (There are other accounts, however, accounts that suggest that Western Logos—philosophy and science—is just our version of myth.) But let us suppose that something different *did* take place in Greece about 700 B.C.E.¹ Let’s suppose that the “first” philosopher’s explanation of the flooding of the Nile River during the summer (most rivers tend to dry up in the summer) as being caused by desert winds (desert winds, not battles or love affairs among gods) really does constitute novelty. **Natural phenomena are explained by other natural phenomena**, not by supernatural events in “dream time”—the time of the ancient gods. In that case, Greece truly is the cradle of **Western philosophy**.

Once, many many years ago, there was a big bang. But great fathers Galileo and Newton were not dismayed. They conferred and said, “It is good.”



A Modern Myth?

Why Greece, and not, for example, Egypt or Judea? Well, let’s be honest here. Nobody knows. Still, a number of historical facts are relevant to the explanation we seek. For one, there was a very **productive contact** between ancient **Greece** and the cultures of the **eastern Mediterranean region**—Persia,

Mesopotamia, Phoenicia, Cyprus, southern Italy, and Egypt, among others. The Greeks were a well-traveled group and were extremely adept at borrowing ideas, conventions, and artistic forms from the cultures they encountered and applying these elements creatively to their own needs. There is also a recent controversial theory that Greek culture derives greatly from African sources.² It is at least certain, as one historian of Greek ideas has recently said, that “the cultural achievements of archaic and classical Greece are unthinkable without Near Eastern resources to draw upon,”³ and eastern North Africa fits into this map.

Also, unlike the case in some of the surrounding societies, there was no priestly class of censors in Greece. This observation does not mean that Greek thinkers had no restrictions on what they could say—we will see that several charges of impiety were brought against

couldn't just say what they wanted



some of them in the period under study—but that they were able nevertheless to get away with quite a bit that went against prevailing religious opinion. *spoke more freely than religion.*



Another historical fact is that the Greek imagination had always been fertile in its concern with intimate detail. For example, Homer's description of Achilles' shield takes up four pages of the *Iliad*. In addition, the many generations of Greek children who grew up on the poems of Homer and Hesiod⁴—two of the main vehicles that transmitted Greek religion—recognized in them their argumentative, intellectually combative, and questioning nature. The polemical nature of Greek drama and poetry would find a new home in Greek philosophy.

A final component of the world into which philosophy was born is the socioeconomic structure that produced a whole leisured class of

people—mostly male people—with time on their hands that they could spend meditating on philosophical issues. It is always jolting to remember that during much of Greece's history, a major part of the economic foundation of its society was slave labor and booty from military conquests. This fact takes some of the luster from “the Glory that was Greece.”

Still, for whatever reasons, the poetry and drama of the Greeks demonstrate an intense awareness of change, of the war of the opposites—summer to winter, hot to cold, light to dark, and that most dramatic change of all, life to death.



Indeed, this sensitivity to the transitory nature of all things sometimes led the Greeks to pessimism. The poets Homer, Mimnermus, and Simonides all expressed the idea “Generations of men fall like the leaves of the forest.”⁵