

Does the Center Hold?

An Introduction to Western Philosophy

SECOND EDITION

Donald Palmer



Does the Center Hold?
An Introduction to Western Philosophy
Second Edition

Donald Palmer
College of Marin



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Does the Center Hold?

Text and Illustrations
by
Donald Palmer

To Leila

Preface

I think most people, if they are lucky, end up in a professional field to which they were attracted because they had some special affinities, talents, or skills. (I advise my students, “Do what you do best, what you do better than most, and what you love doing”; and I trust that in their case, I am not advocating great criminality.) At least that must be true of philosophy majors. I’ve met students whose parents pressured them to go to law school or medical school, but I can’t remember ever meeting students whose parents insisted that they become philosophy majors. Certainly, nobody ever went into this field motivated by greed, unless he or she was laboring under a serious misapprehension. Plato may have gone into philosophy impelled by a frustrated lust for power, but few make that mistake anymore. So you and I in our youth must have found philosophy somehow inherently interesting and in some way a “natural” for us. Unfortunately, as I’m sure you’ve noticed, not all students agree with us about philosophy’s native charms.

I must admit, based on my own experience as a student (at the College of Marin, the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Madrid, and the University of Navarre), that philosophy can be made to seem tremendously exciting or deadly boring, depending on how it’s taught. (This is probably true of all fields, but somehow it is more true of philosophy.) If we make the reasonable assumption that not every college student has the natural philosophical skills and talents we think we had as philosophy students, then we cannot rest assured that the field of philosophy in itself is inherently attractive to all students. Philosophy is not everyone’s cup of tea, as amazing as that may seem to those of us who love philosophy. (I was shattered

when a student asked, “Does this class get more interesting later?” I wanted to say, “How dull your soul must be. This is philosophy!”) We philosophy teachers believe that our topic offers something important even to students for whom philosophy has no native attraction. But it is up to us to prove it. Without guidance, some people do not see the relevance to their lives of the medieval debate over the status of the universals. (I’m serious, you know. What if there is truth in the last line of Eco’s novel, *The Name of the Rose*? “The Rose exists by virtue of its name. We have only names.” What if Shakespeare is wrong, and that which we call a rose by some other name would not smell as sweet? This matters.)

So, I’ve written this book in the hope that it is a contribution toward a more interesting, perhaps more exciting, and certainly more fun philosophy class. I’ve tried to write it in a lively and engaging manner without watering down difficult ideas too much and without pandering to simplicity. The vocabulary may sometimes be just a notch beyond the students’ familiarity but not so much as to be a “turnoff.” Students want to be challenged, after all. Do I need to justify using cartoons and jokes in order to make the book more entertaining? I hope not. Philosophy should be fun. Thoughts are good to think. That goal also explains why, unlike the authors of many philosophy texts, I’ve taken personal positions on most of the topics I discuss. This approach probably needs more of a justification than do the cartoons. Well, frankly, a philosophy book that simply lays out the various alternative ideas end to end in a purely antiseptic way is a book I find inherently dull and suspect. (I don’t mind if a cafeteria lays out food that way, but then I don’t like cafeterias much either.) You’ll no doubt disagree with some of my conclusions, but at least I don’t think you’ll find them doctrinaire. I’m a hopeless eclectic—or perhaps a Jamesian. (If it works, use it!) Not only that, but according to my experience as student and teacher, part of the dynamics of a good philosophy course, unlike courses in Spanish or biology, consists in slight antagonisms between the text and the class. Think of this as an opportunity! I’m sure I’ve given you plenty of fodder.

I hope one of the strengths of this book is found in the connections it makes between philosophy and other fields in which your students are interested, especially art, literature, physics, sociology, psychology, and psychoanalysis. Philosophy may no longer be the queen of all disciplines, but she is certainly their consort.

Despite certain appearances to the contrary, the text is fairly conventional in the selection of material. The topics are themes typi-

cally taught in introductory philosophy courses on this continent. I think the chapter divisions and subdivisions speak for themselves in this respect. I try to establish continuity throughout the book both by providing a Glossary with a system of cross-references and by keeping certain themes alive from chapter to chapter so that ideas once learned do not simply evaporate. (Here, too, “use it or lose it.”)

The changes in this new edition are the consequence of numerous communications to me from professors, students, and general readers. I am grateful for the many suggestions proffered, especially for the extensive comments, criticisms, and recommendations made by the following philosophy teachers who had used the first edition as a college text and who were in a good position to detect the book’s strengths and weaknesses: David Carl, Diablo Valley College; Andrea Grace Diem, Mt. San Antonio College; Daniel Kealey, Towson State University; Wesley Kobylak, Monroe Community College; Glenn McCoy, Eastern New Mexico University; Edward Slowick, Ohio University; and Steve Wilkens, Azusa Pacific University.

The many suggestions I received resulted in scores of minor alterations, deletions, and corrections scattered throughout the body of the book, and in several major changes as well: a more extensive treatment of the pre-Socratic philosophers, a new section on Aristotle and one on Spinoza, a section on mysticism, and one on the feminist critique of Western moral philosophy, and a section on the “deep ecology” movement. Each chapter is now followed by a list of inexpensive and readable paperback books for those who would like to delve further into philosophy’s deep waters, and at the end of each chapter there are now a number of “topics for consideration” to aid students and teachers who are using this book as a college text. I also reorganized the structure of several chapters.

I hope that all these changes and additions have produced an improved version of *Does the Center Hold?*

And now to the acknowledgments. If a long list of names bores you, skip this paragraph because I intend to pay my debts here and thank many of the people who participated in the construction of this book (most without their knowledge or consent). First, the philosophers. . . . Well, that’s all the philosophers I’ve ever studied but particularly Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard, Sartre, Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, and Hume; you’ll hear from them again. (Some may be rolling over in their graves.) Next, my own teachers, including Virginia Orkney, Cornelius Weber, George Duncan, Howell Breece, John Searle, Stanley Cavell, Benson Mates, Stephen Pepper, Jerry Clegg,

Juan Rodriguez Rosado, Leonardo Polo, and (by osmosis) Charles Addams and Virgil “Vip” Partch. Next, thanks to all my students over a twenty-five-year period at the College of Marin—all five thousand of them. (When I reach seven thousand, I’ll retire.) Then particular thanks to my editor, Jim Bull, who not only suffered all this, but actually solicited it, as he did my first book, *Looking at Philosophy*. I would also like to thank the following members of the staff at Mayfield who worked diligently on this second edition: Julianna Scott Fein, Robin Mouat, Jeanne Schreiber, Pam Trainer, and Uyen Phan. I also want to thank the copyeditor, Jay Stewart, for her astute insights.

Also, though it may seem odd, I want to thank the great American desert, where many thoughts were hatched and pages written—the Smoke Creek Desert, the Black Rock Desert, the Mojave, the Organ Pipe National Monument, the Anza-Borrego, and therewith (of course) the late Edward Abbey, wherever you may be. Finally, let me thank my true source of energy, inspiration, and love, the person to whom this book is dedicated, my wife, Leila May. Without her, even philosophy would be worth much less to me.

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Introduction

Introductions are meant to introduce. They establish relations between people and other people or between people and ideas or places. But that's the purpose of this whole book, which is an introduction to philosophy. This book is meant to introduce people to other people (most of whom are dead, unfortunately), people to ideas (living, I hope), and people to a place (the high country of the mind—though there are a few bogs, sinks, and badlands here as well, I fear). So such a book should not need much of an introduction, which would be merely an introduction to an introduction.

Still, a few preliminary comments are appropriate. First, a word about the style. Everybody's style is both unique and imitative. Consciously or unconsciously, I've imitated the styles of my teachers and of the philosophers I've studied. (I've thanked them in the preface.) This book is written in something of a unique style despite all these influences. I hope philosophy teachers, philosophy students, and the general reader will find my style compatible with their own styles of teaching, learning, thinking, and enjoying. My style attempts to be both lighthearted and serious at the same time. It is lighthearted because of my deep conviction that joy and knowledge are not mutually exclusive (Nietzsche's "joyful wisdom"). I hope you'll find at least some of the jokes funny without being distracting. I dare to hope that a few of them might be illuminating. But the book is also serious because it asks serious questions. The philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger tell us that to be human is to confront the world with questions. And all of our smaller questions are framed by the bigger questions, such as: "What is reality?" "What is knowledge?"

“What is value?” “What is it to be human?” These are philosophical questions. They are what philosophy (and life) are about. What annoys some people about philosophy is that these questions never seem to receive a final answer. Each generation appears to answer them; then each new generation rephrases them in such a way as to require new answers. But that’s also what is annoying about life (and what’s exciting about it as well).

Nevertheless, I have been so presumptuous as to try to draw my own tentative conclusions at the end of each chapter. This isn’t always done in introductory philosophy books because students are supposed to be allowed to draw their own conclusions—but I suspect that one way or another students will manage to survive my conclusions (especially with the help of their professors). And if you don’t want to be contaminated by my conclusions, just skip them. (Although who’s fooling whom? Writers’ conclusions are usually subconsciously smuggled into the formulation of the questions they pose. Be on guard!)

Another feature of this book to which students should be alerted is its exclusively Western orientation. The philosophers and philosophies studied here are all in the Greco-Roman-European tradition. Rich philosophical veins exist in other cultures, but I do not have the expertise to mine them. Not only are most of the philosophies in this book Western philosophies, but they are systems of thought that have been put forward for the most part by males. This is a weakness in my book for which I am only partly at fault. I agree with feminist philosophers who claim that in the past women have been systematically discouraged from attempting to participate in the history of philosophy and that when women did make such attempts, they were marginalized or even suppressed. I am heartened to note that today the system of barriers that has discouraged women from a philosophical vocation is being dismantled.

Now, what about the title of the book, “*Does the Center Hold?*” I borrowed the idea from the poet William Butler Yeats, who, in “The Second Coming,” says, “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.” Yet in prereflective thought (life before philosophy), the center certainly seems to hold most of the time for most of us. The world we inhabit presents itself to us in a fairly orderly and predictable manner in both its physical and social manifestations. But occasionally, natural or social disasters burst forth (such as earthquakes and wars), the order and reasonableness of things disappear, and there is chaos. Also, at some point in their lives, most individuals suffer bouts of

“mini-madness,” where the center does not seem to hold. (Such an experience may have inspired Yeats’s poem.) Furthermore, as Descartes reminds us, every night we each slip into a dream world that is madder than madness. Then we wake up and minimize the experience of unreason by relegating it to a sphere of unreality.

When I was a child, I liked to go to Playland at the Beach in San Francisco (now covered over with townhouses). One of my favorite spots was the Dizzy Dish. You sat at the center of a large disk that slowly began rotating. As it moved faster and faster, only the person sitting at the exact center, marked by an orange circle, was safe (by virtue of centripetal force). All others inevitably began sliding off the disk at first inch by inch; then suddenly, amid much shrieking, they were hurled to the perimeter (centrifugal force). When you first felt yourself slipping, you clawed to reach the middle, but inexorably it seemed to pull away from you. The center did not hold. I suspect that the onset of insanity sometimes provokes similar sensations but so does the study of philosophy. Under the philosophical scrutiny of thought, knowledge, reality, and values, the commonsensical center and normal orderliness of the world seem to slip away. As Nietzsche said, while philosophizing we sometimes feel as though we have cut our moorings and are floating off into the cold darkness of outer space.

And yet philosophy is not just a skeptical undertaking whose point is to dethrone the normal and commonplace. It is also an attempt to achieve a view of “the bigger picture”—to see whether sense can be made of the totality of experience. The book’s title, “Does the Center Hold?” asks whether a scrutiny of human experience reveals some kind of unity, or does it plunge us into chaos? Each of the chapters in this book attempts to be an aid to the reader in answering that overarching question and each does this by scrutinizing a different feature of experience. Of course, readers must draw their own conclusions. Mine, flavored with what I hope is a healthy skepticism, is that the center does hold, but only roughly. And some days it seems to hold better than others.