

NORMAN MELCHERT



The Great Conversation

Volume I: Pre-Socratics through Descartes

THIRD EDITION



THE GREAT CONVERSATION



Third Edition

Volume I

Pre-Socratics through Descartes

Norman Melchert

Virginia Commonwealth University



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For Laura, Andrea, and Madelyn

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A Word to Instructors



THE THIRD EDITION of *The Great Conversation* is available in two paperback volumes as well as in the complete hardback book. This is Volume I. It contains slightly more than half the contents of the whole, from the pre-Socratics to Descartes. Volume II focuses on the modern period, ending with treatments of Wittgenstein and Heidegger. Two chapters overlap the volumes: a transitional chapter dealing with the Renaissance and the chapter containing Descartes' *Meditations*. Both volumes are appropriate as core texts for introductory philosophy courses; they could also be used in history of philosophy course sequences.

Features of the third edition include:

- An expanded treatment of myth is presented in Chapter 1, called "Before Philosophy: Myth in Hesiod and Homer." This enhancement offers a sharper contrast between philosophical thinking and mythical thinking than was possible before.
- The complete text of Plato's dialogue *Crito* is included, together with commentary and questions.

- A new format is used for the complete works, making them stand out from the surrounding text.
- The Robert Fagels translation of Homer is used, as well as C. D. C. Reeve's revision of Grube's *Republic*, for easier reading by students.
- There is a new chapter on Thomas Aquinas.
- There are substantial new treatments of Locke and Berkeley.
- More arguments are presented in a semiformal way, to aid in teaching students what arguments are like and how they can be criticized.
- A historical time line is included in the covers of the book.
- Many changes have been made to aid in clarity and ease of reading.

The "conversation" metaphor continues to be taken seriously, made concrete by an even larger number of cross-references. I still aim to tell the dramatic "story" of philosophy in a lively and engaging way, hoping to draw students in to the conversation.

In this era when even the educated have such a thin sense of history, teaching philosophy in this conversational, cumulative, back-and-forward-looking way can be a service not just to philosophical understanding, but to the culture as a whole.

NOTE: In this first volume, you will note some cross-references that go beyond it to the second volume, so there will be references to page numbers that do not exist within the scope of the book. I trust this will be neither confusing nor excessively frustrating.

A Word to Students



NOTE: THIS IS Volume I of a connected two-volume work. (It is also available as a single, complete hardback book.) This volume begins with the dawning of philosophical thought in the West and takes us up to the beginning of the modern period with Descartes' *Meditations*. The second volume starts there and moves to important twentieth century thinkers.

We all have opinions—we can't help it. Having opinions is as natural to us as breathing. Opinions, moreover, are a dime a dozen. They're floating all around us and they're so different from each other. One person believes this, another that. You believe in God, your buddy doesn't. John thinks there's nothing wrong with keeping a found wallet, you are horrified. Some of us say, "Everybody's got their own values"; others are sure that *some* things are just plain wrong—wrong for everybody. Some delay gratification for the sake of long-term goals; others indulge in whatever pleasures happen to be at hand. What kind of world do we live in? Jane studies science to find out, Jack turns to the occult. Is death the end for us?—Some say yes, some say no.

What's a person to do?

Study Philosophy!

You don't want simply to be at the mercy of accident in your opinions—for your views to be decided by irrelevant matters such as whom you happen to know or where you were brought up. You want to believe for *good reasons*. That's the right question, isn't it? Which of these many opinions has the best reasons behind it? You want to live your life as wisely as possible.

Fortunately, we have a long tradition of really smart people who have been thinking about issues such as these, and we can go to them for help. They're called "philosophers"—lovers of wisdom—and they have been trying to straighten out all these issues. They are in the business of asking which opinions or views or beliefs there is good reason to accept.

Unfortunately, these philosophers don't all agree either. So you might ask, If these really smart philosophers can't agree on what wisdom says, why should I pay them any attention? The answer is—because it's the best shot you've got. If you seriously want

to improve your opinions, there's nothing better you can do than engage in a "conversation" with the best minds our history has produced.

One of my own teachers, a short, white-haired, elderly gentleman with a thick German accent, used to say, "Whether you will philosophize or won't philosophize, you *must* philosophize." By this, he meant that we can't help making decisions about these crucial matters. We make them either well or badly, conscious of what we are doing or just stumbling along. As Kierkegaard would say, we express such decisions in the way we live, whether or not we have ever given them a moment's thought. In a sense, then, you are already a philosopher, already engaged in the business philosophers have committed themselves to. So you shouldn't have any problem in making a connection with what they write.

Does it help to think about such matters? You might as well ask whether it helps to think about the recipe before you start to cook. Socrates says that "the unexamined life is not worth living." And that's what philosophy is: an examination of opinions—and also of our lives, shaped by these opinions. In thinking philosophically, we try to sort our opinions into two baskets: the good-views basket and the trash.

We want to think about these matters as clearly and rationally as we can. *Thinking* is a kind of craft. Like any other craft, we can do it well or poorly, with shoddy workmanship or with care, and we improve with practice. It is common for people who want to learn a craft—cabinetmaking, for example—to apprentice themselves for a time to a master, doing what the master does until the time comes when they are skillful enough to set up shop on their own. You can think of reading this book as a kind of apprenticeship in thinking, with Socrates, Plato, Kant, and the rest as the masters. By thinking along with them, noting their insights and arguments, following their examinations of each other's opinions, you should improve that all-important skill of your own.

This Book

This book is organized historically because that's how philosophy has developed. It's not just a recital of this following that, however. It is also intensively *interactive* because that's what philosophy has been. I have taken the metaphor of a conversation seriously. These folks are all talking to each other, arguing with each other, trying to convince each other—and that makes the story of philosophy a dramatic one. Aristotle learns a lot from his teacher, Plato, but argues that Plato makes one big mistake—and that colors everything else he says. Aquinas appreciates what Aristotle has done but claims that Aristotle neglects a basic feature of reality—and that makes all the difference. In the seventeenth century, Descartes looks back on his predecessors with despair, noting that virtually no agreement has been reached on any topic; he resolves to wipe the slate clean and make a new start. Beginning with an analysis of what it is to believe anything at all, C. S. Peirce argues that what Descartes wants to do is impossible. And so it goes.

This conversational and interactive aspect of philosophy is emphasized by a large number of cross-references provided in footnotes. Your understanding of an issue will be substantially enriched if you follow up on these. In order to appreciate the line one thinker is pushing, it is important to see what he is arguing against, where he thinks that others have made mistakes. No philosopher simply makes pronouncements in the dark. There is always something that bugs each thinker, something she thinks is terribly wrong, something that needs correction. This irritant may be something current in the culture, or it may be what other philosophers have been saying. Using the cross-references to understand that background will help you to make sense of what is going on—and why. The index of names and terms at the back of this book will also help you.

Philosophers are noted for introducing novel terms, or using familiar terms in novel ways. They are not alone in this, of course; poets and scientists

do the same. There is no reason to expect that our everyday language will be suited, just as it is, to express the truth of things, so you will have some vocabulary to master. Unusual terms are explained as they are introduced. In addition, you will find a glossary of key words at the back of this book, which you can use to refresh your memory about the meanings of these words. In the text, the first appearance of each glossary item is set in **boldface** type.

The Issues

The search for wisdom that is philosophy ranges far and wide. Who can say ahead of time what might be relevant to that search? Still, there are certain central problems that especially concern philosophers. In your study of this text, you can expect to find extensive discussions of these four issues in particular:

1. *Metaphysics*, the theory of reality. In our own day, Willard Quine has said that the basic question of metaphysics is very simple: *What is there?* The metaphysical question, of course, is not like, “Are there echidnas in Australia?” but “What kinds of things are there fundamentally?” Is the world through and through made of material stuff, or are there souls as well as bodies? Is there a God? If so, of what sort? Is the world-order itself God? Are there universal features to reality, or is everything just the particular thing that it is? Does everything happen as it does necessarily, given what has happened before, or are fresh starts possible?
2. *Epistemology*, the theory of knowledge. We want to think not only about what there is, but also about *how we know* what there is—or, maybe, whether we can know that at all! So we reflectively ask, What is it to know something anyway? How does that differ from just believing it? Are there different kinds of

knowledge? How is knowing something related to its being true? What is truth? How far can our knowledge reach? Are there things that are just unknowable?

3. *Ethics*, the theory of right and wrong, good and bad. It is obvious enough that we aren’t just knowers and believers. We are doers. The question then arises of what wisdom might say about how best to live our lives. Does the fact that something gives us pleasure make it the right thing to do? Do we need to think about how our actions affect others? If so, in what way? Are there really goods and bads, or does thinking so make it so? Do we have duties? If so, where do they come from? What is virtue and vice? What is justice? Is justice important?
4. *Human nature*—Socrates took as his motto a slogan that was inscribed in the temple of Apollo in Delphi: Know Thyself. But that has proved none too easy to do. What are we, anyway? Are we simply bits of matter caught up in the universal mechanism of the world, or do we have minds that escape this deterministic machine? What is it to have a mind? Is mind separate from body? How is it related to the brain? Do we have a free will? How important to my self-identity is my relationship to others? To what degree can I be responsible for the creation of myself?

Running through these issues is a fifth one that perhaps deserves special mention. It centers on the idea of *relativism*. The question is whether there is a way to get beyond the prejudices and assumptions peculiar to ourselves or our culture—or whether that’s all there is. Are there *just* opinions, with no one opinion ultimately any better than any other? Are all views relative to time and place, to culture and position? Is there no *truth*—or, anyway, no truth that we can know to be true?

This problem, which entered the great conversation early, with the Sophists of ancient Greece, has persisted to this day. Most of the Western philosophical tradition can be thought of as a series of attempts to kill such skepticism and relativism,

but this phoenix will not die. Our own age has the distinction, perhaps, of being the first age ever in which the basic assumptions of most people, certainly of most educated people, are relativistic, so this theme will have a particular poignancy for us. We will want to understand how we came to this point and what it means to be here. We will also want to ask ourselves how adequate this relativistic outlook is.

What we are is what we have become, and what we have become has been shaped by our history. In this book, we look at that history, hoping to understand ourselves better and, thereby, gain some wisdom for living our lives.

You will find in this book some cross-references to thinkers presented in Volume II. I hope these will not be confusing to you, but may stimulate you to look further into recent developments.

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Suggestions or comments relating to this new edition may be sent to me at <npmelche@titan.vcu.edu>.

Norman Melchert
Hamilton, New Zealand
October, 1997

I was aware that the reading of all good books is indeed like a conversation with the noblest men of past centuries who were the authors of them, nay a carefully studied conversation, in which they reveal to us none but the best of their thoughts.

—René Descartes

What is education? I should suppose that education was the curriculum one had to run through in order to catch up with oneself, and he who will not pass through this curriculum is helped very little by the fact that he was born in the most enlightened age.

—Søren Kierkegaard

We — mankind — are a conversation.

—Martin Heidegger

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Chapter One



Before Philosophy

Myth in Hesiod and Homer

EVERYWHERE AND AT all times, we humans have wondered at our own existence and at our place in the scheme of things. We have asked, in curiosity and amazement, “What’s it all about?” “How are we to understand this life of ours?” “How is it best lived?” “Does it end at death?” “This world we find ourselves in—where does it come from?” “What is it, anyway?” “How is it related to us?”

These are some of the many philosophical questions we ask. Every culture offers answers, though not every culture has developed what we know as philosophy. Early answers to such questions universally take the form of stories, usually stories involving the gods—gigantic powers of a personal nature, engaged in tremendous feats of creation, often in struggle with one another and intervening in human life for good or ill.

We call these stories *myths*. They are told and retold, elaborated and embroidered; they are taught to children as the plain facts and attain an authority by their age, by repetition, and by the apparent fact (within a given culture) that virtually everyone accepts them. They shape a tradition, and traditions shape lives.

Philosophy, literally “love of wisdom,” begins

when certain individuals start to ask, “Why should we believe these stories?” “How do we know they are true?”—and when they attempt to supply answers that have more going for them than antiquity and the plausibility that comes from common acceptance. Philosophers try to give us *good reasons* for believing one thing or another about these matters—or perhaps good reasons for thinking we can’t answer such questions at all. They look at myth with a critical eye, sometimes appreciating what myths try to do, sometimes attacking myths’ claims to literal truth. So there is a tension between these stories and philosophy, a tension that occasionally breaks into open conflict.

This conflict is epitomized in the execution of Socrates by his fellow Athenians in 399 B.C. Socrates was accused of not believing in the city’s gods and, not coincidentally, of corrupting the young people of Athens. Socrates is a philosopher. One might almost say he is the patron saint of philosophy, reminding us in age after age of what it means to love wisdom—in the way philosophers do.

We want to understand who Socrates is, what happened to him and why. We will also trace the story of the quest for wisdom after Socrates—in Plato and Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas,

Descartes and Hume and Kant—through our intellectual history down to the twentieth century. Myth is not dead in our day of “New Age” movements, of cults and gurus, prophets and channelers, and astrological forecasts. The conflict continues, and it is important that we understand it, for we do want to be wise.

To understand the character of this conflict, we need a sense for the nature of myth. In principle we could look at any of the great mythological traditions, in Babylon or Egypt, India or Rome. Such traditions all have a great deal in common, despite their dramatic differences of detail. But because it was the Greeks of the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. who first began to ask the questions that led to philosophical thinking, it will pay us to look at certain Greek myths. Our aim is neither a comprehensive survey nor mere acquaintance with some of these stories. We will be trying to understand something of Greek religion and culture, of the intellectual and spiritual life of the people who told these stories. As a result, we should be able to grasp something of the mind-set of Socrates’ contemporaries. In this chapter, then, we take a brief look at two of the great Greek poets: Hesiod and Homer.

Hesiod: War among the Gods

The poet we know as Hesiod probably composed his poem *Theogony* toward the end of the eighth century B.C. He was clearly drawing on much older traditions and seems to be synthesizing stories that have different origins and are not always consistent. The term “theogony” means “origin or birth of the gods,” and the stories contained in the poem concern the beginnings of all things. He includes an immense amount of detail in this relatively short work. In this chapter, we look only at certain central events, as Hesiod relates them to us.

First, however, note that Hesiod claims to have written these lines under divine inspiration. (Suggestion: Read quotations aloud, especially poetry; you will find that they become more meaningful.)

The Muses once taught Hesiod to sing
Sweet songs, while he was shepherding his lambs
On holy Helicon; the goddesses
Olympian, daughters of Zeus who holds
The aegis,* first addressed these words to me:
“You rustic shepherds, shame: bellies you are,
Not men! We know enough to make up lies
Which are convincing, but we also have
The skill, when we’ve a mind, to speak the truth.”

So spoke the fresh-voiced daughters of great Zeus
And plucked and gave a staff to me, a shoot
Of blooming laurel, wonderful to see,
And breathed a sacred voice into my mouth
With which to celebrate the things to come
And things which were before.

—*Theogony*, 21–35¹

The Muses, according to the tradition Hesiod is drawing on, are nine daughters born to Zeus and Memory. In this passage, Hesiod is telling us that the stories he narrates are not vulgar shepherds’ lies but are backed by the authority of the chief god and embody the remembrance of events long past. They thus represent the truth, Hesiod says, and are worthy of belief.

What have the Muses revealed?

And sending out
Unearthly music, first they celebrate
The august race of first-born gods, whom Earth
Bore to broad Heaven, then their progeny,
Givers of good things. Next they sing of Zeus
The father of gods and men, how high he is
Above the other gods, how great in strength.

—*Theogony*, 42–48

Note that the gods are themselves *born*; their origin, like our own, is explicitly sexual. Their ancestors are Earth (Gaea, or Gaia) and Heaven (Ouranos).[†] Note also that the gods are characterized as “givers of good things.” For this, of

*The *aegis* is a symbol of authority. Just so, we today may say that an event is presented “under the aegis” of an authoritative sponsor.

[†]Some people nowadays speak of the Gaea hypothesis and urge us to think of Earth as a living organism. Here we have a self-conscious attempt to revive an ancient way of thinking about the planet we inhabit. Ideas of the Earth-mother and Mother Nature are also echoes of such early myths.