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TEN GREAT WORKS OF PHILOSOPHY

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BUILDERS OF WESTERN THOUGHT. EDITED
AND WITH A GENERAL INTRODUCTION
AND COMMENTARIES BY
ROBERT PAUL WOLFF



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Edited and with a
General Introduction and Commentaries
by Robert Paul Wolff


A SIGNET CLASSIC

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Introductory Remarks to the Reader

Man is a speculative being. He looks at the heavens and wonders whether they have an end. He ponders on the cause of the universe, puzzles over the fundamental constituents of things, searches for a meaning in the cycle of seasons and the distribution of good and evil fortune among men.

Man is also a reflective being. He acts, and then reflects on the principles of his actions. He reasons, and then reflects on the rules of correct reasoning. He judges a story to be true or a painting to be beautiful, and then reflects on the criteria of truth and beauty.

From these two impulses, speculation and reflection, there has developed in our civilization an extensive tradition of precise, systematic, sophisticated thought which is called *philosophy*. In the hazy shadows of the earliest recorded Greek thought, we find men wondering about the substance of which the universe is composed. Those cosmological speculations, as they are now called, grew into the theories of classical Greek science, and even today the most advanced branches of modern physics have their roots in the hypotheses of the ancient Greeks.

By the fifth century B.C. Greek thinkers had begun to exercise the reflective powers of the mind; questions were asked about the principles of judgment and reasoning which guided men's thinking and acting. The obscure son of an Athenian midwife devoted his life to questioning his fellow-citizens about their lives; the unexamined life, the unreflective life, was not worth living, he insisted. And in the reflective life of that man, Socrates, philosophy as we know it was born.

It is twenty-five centuries since Socrates walked through the marketplace of Athens. The human world has changed almost beyond recognition. In everything

that pertains to man's acts and accomplishments—in technology, in social institutions, in the very face of the earth—there is change. Yet in man himself we find deep continuities which link us to Socrates' world. Men are still speculative, still reflective. They still wonder about the limits and meaning of the universe, they still heed Socrates' call to reflect upon the fundamental principles of thought and action.

Because of this continuity in man's nature over more than two millennia, philosophy has never forgotten its past. Just as we find human wisdom in the tragedies of the Greek stage or the poetry of Shakespearean England, despite their great historical distance from our own time, so too we find speculative and reflective insight in the Dialogues of Plato, the treatises of Aristotle, and all the great philosophical works which have since made their appearance in western civilization. Philosophy is in this way allied with literature and the arts, which cherish the masterpieces of their history, rather than with mathematics and the sciences, which consign even their classics to the farthest corners of the library. It is appropriate, therefore, that we should approach the subject of philosophy through a reading of some of the great works of the philosophical tradition.

In this book you will find ten great works of philosophical speculation and reflection gathered together. The first author, Plato, is represented by two of his most famous Dialogues. The other authors include Plato's brilliant student Aristotle, and such diverse thinkers as the medieval theologian St. Thomas, the Scots skeptic Hume, the systematic German Kant, and the American philosopher William James. Taken all in all, the ten works span the entire history of western philosophy and the spectrum of philosophical positions from the most extreme skepticism to dogmatic rationalism. Each work can of course be read by itself; the brief introductions will help you to think about the arguments and to develop some of your own. But it might be appropriate here to make some remarks about the sequence of works as a whole, for the full enjoyment of philosophy requires a sense of historical continuities as well as an appreciation for each individual book.

Plato introduces us to the dominant theme of philosophy in the very first Dialogue—Socrates' Apology or defense of his life and calling. It is not enough to live each day as we meet it, acting and reacting to the problems of the moment. Man is capable of thinking about his own actions, of questioning what he has done in order to determine the validity of the principles on which he has relied. Socrates is not content merely to reply to the trumped-up charges which the Athenian rulers have brought against him. He insists on defending the principle of critical inquiry which has guided his daily life for half a century.

The same commitment to reflection leads him to examine the reasons for his submission to the death penalty of the jury. His followers wanted him to flee from Athens; but Socrates insisted on remaining to face death. In the *Crito*, he argues the question out with himself and explains the grounds of his decision. In this way he hopes that we will learn how to make our own important life-decisions, rather than to simply admire Socrates without ourselves becoming any wiser.

The tone of Aristotle's *Poetics* is calmer, more academic, but the aim is still critical reflection. As Socrates was not content merely to *do* what he thought right, so Aristotle is unwilling merely to "know what he likes" in the arts. He must discover why the great tragedies of the Greek playwrights have the dramatic power they do. Beyond that, he seeks the general principles of all art. Again the same quest for the reasons which underlie our thought and action.

With Anselm and Aquinas, we enter the God-filled world of medieval thought. In the tradition of the great speculators, these two churchmen seek to prove the existence of the Divine Being. They do not imagine that such proofs will persuade the infidel, nor even that they will strengthen the faith of the wavering. But like Plato and Aristotle, Anselm and Aquinas are unwilling to believe without knowing the rational foundation of their belief.

This same quest for rational assurance inspires the *Meditations* of the seventeenth-century Frenchman René Descartes. What can I know with certainty? he asked,

and from his question sprang three centuries of doubt, critical reflection, and great philosophy. Descartes broke with his predecessors by seeking his ultimate standpoint in the immediate certainty of his own subjective consciousness. Although he quickly enough affirmed his belief in Anselm's and Aquinas' proofs for the existence of God, the seeds of doubt which he had scattered found fertile soil in the British Isles, and taking root, they flowered a century later in the dramatic skepticism of David Hume.

So far-reaching was Hume's attack in *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* on the power of reason that it created a crisis in philosophy. If Hume was right, then all the systematic theories of religion, science, mathematics, art, and philosophy were built on quicksand. Great challenges often evoke great responses, as Arnold Toynbee has reminded us. In this instance, Hume's challenge called forth a reply from Immanuel Kant in the form of a systematic, many-volumed critique of the limits and powers of the human mind. Kant summarized the central themes of his critical philosophy in a short book entitled *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, which is included here. In a sense, we can view Kant as having compromised the dispute between Descartes and Hume, for while he proved that men can have solidly grounded knowledge of the physical universe in which they live, he proved as well that the price of such knowledge was a giving-up of all claims to know the nature and existence of God.

Plato's concern for politics and public affairs echoes in the writings of John Stuart Mill, a Victorian Englishman whose name is forever associated with the moral philosophy of Utilitarianism. Mill combines the reflective and critical impulse of philosophy with a practical concern for social welfare. His classic essay remains to this day the best exposition of the doctrine which shaped British and American liberalism. Although he wrote more than a century ago, Mill seems thoroughly contemporary in his attempt to define the principles which should guide our collective pursuit of happiness.

We end our intellectual journey at home, with an essay by America's best-known philosopher, William

James. The pragmatism which James espoused owes much to the complex theories of Kant, and much too to the empiricism of David Hume. But in tone and content it is most closely allied to the first of our great works. "The Will to Believe" is, in a way, James' own Apology. Like Socrates, James was a philosopher who went outside the classroom to confront the issues of the day. James, like Socrates, was not afraid to live by a belief which he could not prove, while nevertheless subjecting that belief again and again to the scrutiny of reflective reason. We might say that while both Socrates and James believed that the unexamined life was not worth living, they also believed that the un-lived life was not worth examining. To paraphrase a famous remark by Kant, reflection without life is empty, and life without reflection is blind.

Let these introductory remarks suffice to set you on your way. The world of philosophy is a great adventure, as exciting in its way as the worlds of history and literature. Remember one thing as you proceed: no philosopher is happy unless he gets a good argument from his audience, so question every premise, challenge every deduction, examine every conclusion—and by the time you have finished this book, you will be well on your way to becoming a philosopher yourself!

—ROBERT PAUL WOLFF
New York, 1969

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Plato: *Apology*

Historians of philosophy commonly agree that Thales, a sixth-century B.C. Greek from the Mediterranean island of Miletus, was the first philosopher in western civilization. But philosophy as we know it today can more truly be said to date from the life and activities of the great Athenian gadfly, Socrates. We are so accustomed to the presence in our midst of a number of dissenters, or social critics, that it is hard to remember how strange Socrates must have seemed to his contemporaries as he walked through the public squares of Athens, quizzing his fellow-citizens on the nature and justification of their lives. He must have been a man of remarkable intelligence and force of personality, for he gathered around him many of the ablest young men of the Athenian upper classes. When the itinerant teachers of rhetoric, or "sophists," came to town to speak in public and win the applause of the Athenians, Socrates would pester them with modest-seeming questions designed to expose the pretensions of these professional wise men. He did the same thing to the political leaders of Athens, to their increasing irritation and embarrassment.

Eventually, Socrates fell afoul of the democratic regime which installed itself in Athens after the brief rule of the "Thirty Tyrants." Because he associated with the young aristocrats who opposed the new regime, and also because his critical questions weakened the people's faith in the democratic leaders, Socrates was brought to trial on some trumped-up charges of irreligion. Many of his disciples attended the trial, in which he defended himself before a jury of 501 of his fellow citizens. Among his followers was Plato (427?-347? B.C.), a young man from a wealthy and important family. It is from his brilliant Dialogues, written between twenty and sixty years

after the time of Socrates' trial, that we derive virtually all our knowledge of the life, philosophy, and style of thought of Socrates.

Socrates could have defended himself in a conventional way, and had he been willing to accept exile as a punishment, the jury would no doubt have agreed. But instead, he chose to offer a defense of the life which he had led in Athens for most of his seventy years. His great speech before the court, preserved in the Dialogue called the *Apology*, remains to this day the finest justification ever voiced of the philosophical life.

The keynote of Socrates' faith is the belief that *the unexamined life is not worth living*. This is not a truth of physics or mathematics which one can prove by deduction from axioms or experiments. It is an appeal to our sense of our own dignity as rational creatures. Can I respect myself—can I ask others to respect me—if I do not continually reflect upon the principles which guide my life? Can I call myself fully human if I go from day to day blindly, sheeplike, failing to subject my life and my acts to rigorous critical examination? Socrates answers *no*, and as this Dialogue and the next demonstrate, he was prepared to die for his belief.

Socrates was the first great philosopher, and he was the first of philosophy's martyrs. He bequeathed to philosophy a standard of seriousness of purpose which few men have been able to meet. But he bequeathed also a sense of the fascination, the delight, the sheer fun, of the intellectual life. I have always believed that we do not completely appreciate Socrates until we can laugh with him as well as weep for him.

APOLOGY

How YOU, O Athenians, have been affected by my accusers, I cannot tell; but I know that they almost made me forget who I was—so persuasively did they speak; and yet they have hardly uttered a word of truth. But of the many falsehoods told by them, there was one which quite amazed me;—I mean when they said that you should be upon your guard and not allow yourselves to be deceived by the force of my eloquence. To say this, when they were certain to be detected as soon as I opened my lips and proved myself to be anything but a great speaker, did indeed appear to me most shameless—unless by the force of eloquence they mean the force of truth; for if such is their meaning, I admit that I am eloquent. But in how different a way from theirs! Well, as I was saying, they have scarcely spoken the truth at all; but from me you shall hear the whole truth: not, however, delivered after their manner in a set oration duly ornamented with words and phrases. No, by heaven! but I shall use the words and arguments which occur to me at the moment; for I am confident in the justice of my cause¹: at my time of life I ought not to be appearing before you, O men of Athens, in the character of a juvenile orator—let no one expect it of me. And I must beg of you to grant me a favour:—If I defend myself in my accustomed manner, and you hear me using the words which I have been in the habit of using in the agora, at the tables of the money-changers, or anywhere else, I would ask you not to be surprised, and not to interrupt me on this account. For I am more than seventy years of age, and appearing now for the first time in a court of law, I am quite a stranger to the

¹ Or, I am certain that I am right in taking this course.

language of the place; and therefore I would have you regard me as if I were really a stranger, whom you would excuse if he spoke in his native tongue, and after the fashion of his country:—Am I making an unfair request of you? Never mind the manner, which may or may not be good; but think only of the truth of my words, and give heed to that: let the speaker speak truly and the judge decide justly.

And first, I have to reply to the older charges and to my first accusers, and then I will go on to the later ones. For of old I have had many accusers, who have accused me falsely to you during many years; and I am more afraid of them than of Anytus and his associates, who are dangerous, too, in their own way. But far more dangerous are the others, who began when you were children, and took possession of your minds with their falsehoods, telling of one Socrates, a wise man, who speculated about the heaven above, and searched into the earth beneath, and made the worse appear the better cause. The disseminators of this tale are the accusers whom I dread; for their hearers are apt to fancy that such enquirers do not believe in the existence of the gods. And they are many, and their charges against me are of ancient date, and they were made by them in the days when you were more impressible than you are now—in childhood, or it may have been in youth—and the cause when heard went by default, for there was none to answer. And hardest of all, I do not know and cannot tell the names of my accusers; unless in the chance case of a comic poet. All who from envy and malice have persuaded you—some of them having first convinced themselves—all this class of men are most difficult to deal with; for I cannot have them up here, and cross-examine them, and therefore I must simply fight with shadows in my own defence, and argue when there is no one who answers. I will ask you then to assume with me, as I was saying, that my opponents are of two kinds; one recent, the other ancient: and I hope that you will see the propriety of my answering the latter first, for these accusations you heard long before the others, and much oftener.

Well, then, I must make my defence, and endeavour

to clear away in a short time a slander which has lasted a long time. May I succeed, if to succeed be for my good and yours, or likely to avail me in my cause! The task is not an easy one; I quite understand the nature of it. And so leaving the event with God, in obedience to the law I will now make my defence.

I will begin at the beginning, and ask what is the accusation which has given rise to the slander of me, and in fact has encouraged Meletus to prefer this charge against me. Well, what do the slanderers say? They shall be my prosecutors, and I will sum up their words in an affidavit: "Socrates is an evildoer, and a curious person, who searches into things under the earth and in heaven, and he makes the worse appear the better cause; and he teaches the aforesaid doctrines to others." Such is the nature of the accusation: it is just what you have yourselves seen in the comedy of Aristophanes, who has introduced a man whom he calls Socrates, going about and saying that he walks in air, and talking a deal of nonsense concerning matters of which I do not pretend to know either much or little—not that I mean to speak disparagingly of any one who is a student of natural philosophy. I should be very sorry if Meletus could bring so grave a charge against me. But the simple truth is, O Athenians, that I have nothing to do with physical speculations. Very many of those here present are witnesses to the truth of this, and to them I appeal. Speak then, you who have heard me, and tell your neighbours whether any of you have ever known me hold forth in few words or in many upon such matters. . . . You hear their answer. And from what they say of this part of the charge you will be able to judge of the rest.

As little foundation is there for the report that I am a teacher, and take money; this accusation has no more truth in it than the other. Although, if a man were really able to instruct mankind, to receive money for giving instruction would, in my opinion, be an honour to him. There is Gorgias of Leontium, and Prodicus of Ceos, and Hippias of Elis, who go the round of the cities, and are able to persuade the young men to leave their own citizens by whom they might be taught for nothing, and come to them whom they not only pay, but are thankful

if they may be allowed to pay them. There is at this time a Parian philosopher residing in Athens, of whom I have heard; and I came to hear of him in this way:—I came across a man who has spent a world of money on the Sophists, Callias, the son of Hipponicus, and knowing that he had sons, I asked him: “Callias,” I said, “if your two sons were foals or calves, there would be no difficulty in finding some one to put over them; we should hire a trainer of horses, or a farmer, probably, who would improve and perfect them in their own proper virtue and excellence; but as they are human beings, whom are you thinking of placing over them? Is there any one who understands human and political virtue? You must have thought about the matter, for you have sons; is there any one?” “There is,” he said. “Who is he?” said I; “and of what country? and what does he charge?” “Evenus the Parian,” he replied; “he is the man, and his charge is five minae.” Happy is Evenus, I said to myself, if he really has this wisdom, and teaches at such a moderate charge. Had I the same, I should have been very proud and conceited; but the truth is that I have no knowledge of the kind.

I dare say, Athenians, that some one among you will reply, “Yes, Socrates, but what is the origin of these accusations which are brought against you; there must have been something strange which you have been doing? All these rumours and this talk about you would never have arisen if you had been like other men: tell us, then, what is the cause of them, for we should be sorry to judge hastily of you.” Now, I regard this as a fair challenge, and I will endeavour to explain to you the reason why I am called wise and have such an evil fame. Please to attend then. And although some of you may think that I am joking, I declare that I will tell you the entire truth. Men of Athens, this reputation of mine has come of a certain sort of wisdom which I possess. If you ask me what kind of wisdom, I reply, wisdom such as may perhaps be attained by man, for to that extent I am inclined to believe that I am wise; whereas the persons of whom I was speaking have a superhuman wisdom, which I may fail to describe, because I have it not myself; and he who says that I have, speaks falsely, and

is taking away my character. And here, O men of Athens, I must beg you not to interrupt me, even if I seem to say something extravagant. For the word which I will speak is not mine. I will refer you to a witness who is worthy of credit; that witness shall be the God of Delphi—he will tell you about my wisdom, if I have any, and of what sort it is. You must have known Chaerephon; he was early a friend of mine, and also a friend of yours, for he shared in the recent exile of the people, and returned with you. Well, Chaerephon, as you know, was very impetuous in all his doings, and he went to Delphi and boldly asked the oracle to tell him whether—as I was saying, I must beg you not to interrupt—he asked the oracle to tell him whether any one was wiser than I was, and the Pythian prophetess answered, that there was no man wiser. Chaerephon is dead himself; but his brother, who is in court, will confirm the truth of what I am saying.

Why do I mention this? Because I am going to explain to you why I have such an evil name. When I heard the answer, I said to myself, What can the God mean? and what is the interpretation of his riddle? for I know that I have no wisdom, small or great. What then can he mean when he says that I am the wisest of men? And yet he is a god, and cannot lie; that would be against his nature. After long consideration, I thought of a method of trying the question. I reflected that if I could only find a man wiser than myself, then I might go to the god with a refutation in my hand. I should say to him, "Here is a man who is wiser than I am; but you said that I was the wisest." Accordingly I went to one who had the reputation of wisdom, and observed him—his name I need not mention; he was a politician whom I selected for examination—and the result was as follows: When I began to talk with him, I could not help thinking that he was not really wise, although he was thought wise by many, and still wiser by himself; and thereupon I tried to explain to him that he thought himself wise, but was not really wise; and the consequence was that he hated me, and his enmity was shared by several who were present and heard me. So I left him, saying to myself, as I went away: Well, although I do not suppose that either of us knows

anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is,—for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows; I neither know nor think that I know. In this latter particular, then, I seem to have slightly the advantage of him. Then I went to another who had still higher pretensions to wisdom, and my conclusion was exactly the same. Whereupon I made another enemy of him, and of many others besides him.

Then I went to one man after another, being not unconscious of the enmity which I provoked, and I lamented and feared this: but necessity was laid upon me,—the word of God, I thought, ought to be considered first. And I said to myself, Go I must to all who appear to know, and find out the meaning of the oracle. And I swear to you, Athenians, by the dog I swear!—for I must tell you the truth—the result of my mission was just this: I found that the men most in repute were all but the most foolish; and that others less esteemed were really wiser and better. I will tell you the tale of my wanderings and of the “Herculean” labours, as I may call them, which I endured only to find at last the oracle irrefutable. After the politicians, I went to the poets; tragic, dithyrambic, and all sorts. And there, I said to myself, you will be instantly detected; now you will find out that you are more ignorant than they are. Accordingly I took them some of the most elaborate passages in their own writings, and asked what was the meaning of them—thinking that they would teach me something. Will you believe me? I am almost ashamed to confess the truth, but I must say that there is hardly a person present who would not have talked better about their poetry than they did themselves. Then I knew that not by wisdom do poets write poetry, but by a sort of genius and inspiration; they are like diviners or soothsayers who also say many fine things, but do not understand the meaning of them. The poets appeared to me to be much in the same case; and I further observed that upon the strength of their poetry they believed themselves to be the wisest of men in other things in which they were not wise. So I departed, conceiving myself to be superior to them for the same reason that I was superior to the politicians.