

Daniel Kolak / Raymond Martin



WISDOM
without
ANSWERS

Third Edition

A Brief Introduction to Philosophy

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Third Edition

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To Dionysus
and
The Panther

PREFACE

Socrates was the quintessential philosopher. He knew just this: that, ultimately, he did not know anything. But he had the skill to show others, no matter how sophisticated or erudite or pretentious, that they too knew nothing.

Socrates used philosophy to call *everything* into question, including even what he took for granted in calling everything into question! He used philosophy—as true philosophers always use it—to show us how to pull the rug out from under ourselves, how to cut through the shield of answers that separates us from the mystery.

This book welcomes you to philosophy in the way that Socrates, if he were here, would welcome you: by pulling you out of your answers long enough to experience the wisdom of unknowing.

Many people come to philosophy with the false impression that it is merely a body of knowledge. They expect to receive information rather than to think for themselves. They often assume they know the answers to questions philosophers want to reopen in a fresh way. Thus philosophers often complain that their students are neither motivated nor ready to grapple with the material used in introductory courses.

This book is designed to solve the problems of motivation and preparation. We show, rather than tell, that philosophy is a questioning and reasoning activity, not a body of information. We engage students in the skills they need to interact critically with the material typically presented in an introductory course. Most importantly, we systematically deconstruct students' attachment to ready-made answers, leaving them ready to make new meaning.

For the third edition we revised the entire book, making many clarifications and additions. We added one new chapter—Freedom—and substantially revised another—Knowledge—as well as updated and expanded the essays on Further Reading, now called "Philosophical Connections," which appear at the end of each chapter.

We thank all the friends, students, and colleagues who, over the years, have read and commented on drafts and editions, especially: Lewis White Beck, Stiv Fleishman, Louis J. Pojman, Susan Leigh Anderson, Mort Winston, Manuel Velasquez, Marshall Missner, Michelle Higginbotham, Richard Hanley, Larry Dobbs, David Reisman, Wendy Zentz, Stephen Bickham, Bruce Jannusch, Leon Miller, David Resnik, John O'Connor, Hope May, Joe Salerno, Mark Scala, and Michael Russo. We would also thank all the people at Wadsworth for doing such a fine job, especially Jennie Redwitz for her superb work in the production of the third edition.

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INTRODUCTION

An ancient riddle tells of three wise men from three different empires who showed up one day at the gate to a peaceful kingdom. Each had come to seek asylum from the horrible three-way war that, in spite of all their wise advice, had brought their empires to ruin.

The queen of the peaceful kingdom, herself very wise, arrested the three wise men and brought them in chains before an assembly of her people. With all the citizens present, she asked the three wise men why, if they were so wise, they had not been able to prevent their kingdoms from destroying each other.

"The people of each empire, against the advice of their wise men and their emperors, willed that the other empires be destroyed; the emperors had no choice but to comply," said the first wise man.

"The emperors of each empire, against the advice of their wise men and their people, willed that the other empires be destroyed; the people had no choice but to comply," said the second.

"The wise men of each empire convinced the emperors and the people, against their better judgment, that the other empires must be destroyed; the emperors and the people lacked the wisdom not to comply," said the third.

The queen waited for the murmurs that had suddenly arisen throughout the crowd to subside, and then spoke:

"No one shall be a wise man in my kingdom who does not know why kingdoms collapse. So I ask you three wise men, former enemies, to confer among yourselves and decide which answer is correct. If you cannot reach agreement on that, none of you is fit to be wise man in my kingdom, and you will all be beheaded for the crimes you have committed against your own people."

The wise men whispered among themselves for several minutes before coming to a conclusion.

"All three answers are correct, your highness," one of them said.

Again there was a murmur through the crowd.

"You are wise indeed," answered the queen, "but I have no place in my kingdom for three clever enemies who might destroy my people the way you have destroyed your own. So I offer you a choice. Either all three of you leave now, together, free and with my blessing to seek your fortunes and asylum elsewhere. Or you stay. But if you choose to stay, two of you must die.

"The rules are simple. I will ask you to solve a riddle that none of my subjects has been able to solve. The one who solves it first will live as the highest of all the wise men in my empire. The other two will die."

Again the three wise men, each of whom was convinced that he was wiser than the other two, and each of whom would have liked to see his two enemies dead, quickly agreed. They chose to stay.

The queen blindfolded the three wise men and then painted a dot on each one's forehead. She asked her citizens to take note of the color of each dot and to keep silent about it. The citizens could see that each dot was red. The queen then took the blindfolds off the three wise men and had them face each other.

"I have painted either a red or a green dot on each of your foreheads," she said loudly to the wise men. "Raise your right hand if you see a red dot on at least one of the foreheads facing you."

Because all three wise men had red dots painted on their foreheads, they each saw that the others had red dots painted on their foreheads and so raised their hands.

"Now," ordered the queen, "without talking, and using only the information provided, you must figure out the color of the dot on your own forehead. The first wise man who can do this and then explain how he did it will live."

The first wise man thought, "The other two have raised their hands. Therefore each of them sees a red dot. I can see that they both have red dots on their own foreheads. But they would both raise their hands whether the dot on my forehead was red or green. So there is no way for me to know whether the dot on my forehead is red or green!"

The second wise man thought, "This riddle is unsolvable. If the dot on my forehead is green, I would see what I am now seeing: the other two with their hands raised, and me with my hand raised. If the dot on my forehead is red, I would also see what I am now seeing: the other two with their hands raised, and me with my hand

raised. Because the only information I have to go on is the observation that all three hands are raised, and all three hands would be raised whether the dot on my own forehead is red or green, I have no way of determining whether my dot is red or green."

Ten minutes passed. Suddenly the third wise man exclaimed, "The dot on my forehead is red!" and then explained to the queen and to the stunned crowd how he knew.

How did he do it?

Here's how the third wise man figured out that he, too, had a red dot on his forehead. First, he thought, "There is no way I can figure out the answer by looking merely at what I see from my own point of view. What I see from my point of view would be the same whether my dot was red or green. But the riddle may have an answer. And if it does, and I don't soon discover it, one of the other wise men will, and I shall die. I must, therefore, look for more than what I can now see.

"But what can I look for that I am not now seeing? There are only the three raised hands and the two red dots. If only I could see exactly what Zon and Hsu, the other two wise men, are seeing from their points of view! Perhaps I can. How do things look to Zon and Hsu?

"Zon has a red dot, but he doesn't know it. What he does know is that Hsu has a red dot and that I, Sol, have whatever color dot I have. Suppose, then, that I have a red dot. Then Zon would be in the same predicament I'm now in, namely that of seeing two red dots, and so could not solve the riddle.

"Suppose, then, that I have a green dot. In that case Zon sees that I have a green dot and that Hsu has a red dot. But if I have a green dot and Hsu has a red dot, Zon would *eventually* be able to figure out that he too has a red dot, for Zon would reason as follows: 'Sol has a green dot, and Hsu has raised his hand, indicating that he sees at least one red dot; because Sol has a green dot, the red dot that Hsu sees must belong to me (Zon). Hence, I (Zon) have a red dot.'

"Hsu also has a red dot but doesn't know it. What he does know is that Zon has a red dot and that I—Sol—have whatever color dot I have. Hence, Hsu is in exactly the same predicament as Zon. Hence, if I had a green dot, Hsu would *eventually* be able to figure out that he too has a red dot.

"Because ten minutes have elapsed, however, and neither Zon nor Hsu has figured out that he has a red dot, I too must have a red dot!"

At this point Sol informed the queen that he had a red dot, explaining that he came to that conclusion by looking at the situation from the points of view of the others.

The story ends with the beheading of Zon and Hsu and the proclamation by the queen that Sol was now the wisest man in the kingdom. She put special emphasis on the word *man*, and everyone laughed. She then honored Sol by naming the sun after him and offering him any of the royal jewels he most favored.

Sol bowed and thanked her but asked to be given instead the little brush and the can of red paint. He then walked among the crowd and continued on throughout the kingdom, painting red dots on all the people's foreheads as a reminder of what had happened that day.

This all happened a long, long time ago and in a land far, far away, and so, of course, most people have forgotten about it. They have also forgotten the lesson that learning to see ourselves and the world from different points of view can sometimes keep us from losing our heads. Perhaps you too will forget. But one day soon you are bound to come across someone with a red dot painted on his or her forehead. And then you will remember.

WHERE

Where are you?

Obvious answer: "Here."

Where is "here"?

If you were "here" with us, you would be in Boonsboro. Some of our friends say Boonsboro is nowhere. The map says it's a small town in western Maryland. Maryland is somewhere—on the east coast of the United States. It might be in the Northern Hemisphere. Or it might be in the Western Hemisphere. Or perhaps both. We're not sure. It doesn't really matter. What hemisphere we're in depends upon an arbitrary partitioning of the Earth.

Where is Earth? For if we know we're on Earth but we don't know where Earth is, we don't really know where we are. Fortunately, another map tells us Earth is the third planet from the sun in our solar system.

Where is our solar system? A larger map tells us our solar system is in an outer arm of the Milky Way galaxy, which is in the Local Cluster of galaxies, which, finally, is in the universe. But where is the universe?

Now there's a question: *Where is the universe?*

We're out of maps. You might think the universe is everywhere. But this answer at most locates us *within* the universe. It does not give the universe a location. Suppose you are lost at sea and over the radio a distant voice asks where the sea is. Looking around, you say, "Everywhere." This merely locates you somewhere on the sea. It does not locate the sea. Unless you know what lies beyond the borders of the sea, you are still lost.

So, what lies beyond the borders of the universe? Space? No, the universe can't be *in* space, because by *universe* we mean the totality of everything. All space must be in the universe. Where, then, is the universe?

Up to now we've determined the position of each thing by locating it within a containing space. The universe, however, is the ultimate containing space: By definition, the universe contains *everything*. The universe could be somewhere only if there were something the universe did not contain. But there isn't. The universe, therefore, is not anywhere at all; it's nowhere.

So, right now we're in a universe that is nowhere! In one sense, of course, we're still somewhere. For instance, as we write this we are in Boonsboro, Maryland, on the east coast of the United States, in the Northern or Western Hemisphere, on the planet Earth, in our solar system, inside an outer arm of the Milky Way galaxy, in the Local Cluster of galaxies, inside the universe. But, ultimately, *we're all nowhere*.

What seems so solidly in place all around us is floating freely in nothing. Ultimately, there is absolutely no support, no foundation, no container, *nothing* to make the whole secure.

Does that make us feel insecure? You bet it does. Perhaps that's partly why we've partitioned the universe not just into galaxies and solar systems and planets and hemispheres and countries and cities, but even down to streets and numbered houses. We can locate each other. But we cannot locate the whole. We're all still nowhere.

Suppose you're on an oceanliner. You hear a voice over the intercom: "This is the captain speaking. I have no idea where we are. We're completely lost." Your friend says, "Is the captain crazy? He may be lost. The ship may be lost. But I'm not lost. I'm on deck 3, cabin 381. I know exactly where I am."

Your friend's answer might serve some practical purposes. He might want to have his tuxedo pressed for the evening ball. But his answer is also a way of shielding himself from the truth that everyone aboard the ship is lost.

So, where are we? Above us there's a sky full of stars. Below us the Earth. Behind us a mountain. In front, a long meadow descends into a valley. Woods to the right and left. We *know* where we are. We're exactly where some of our friends say we are: nowhere.

Where are you?