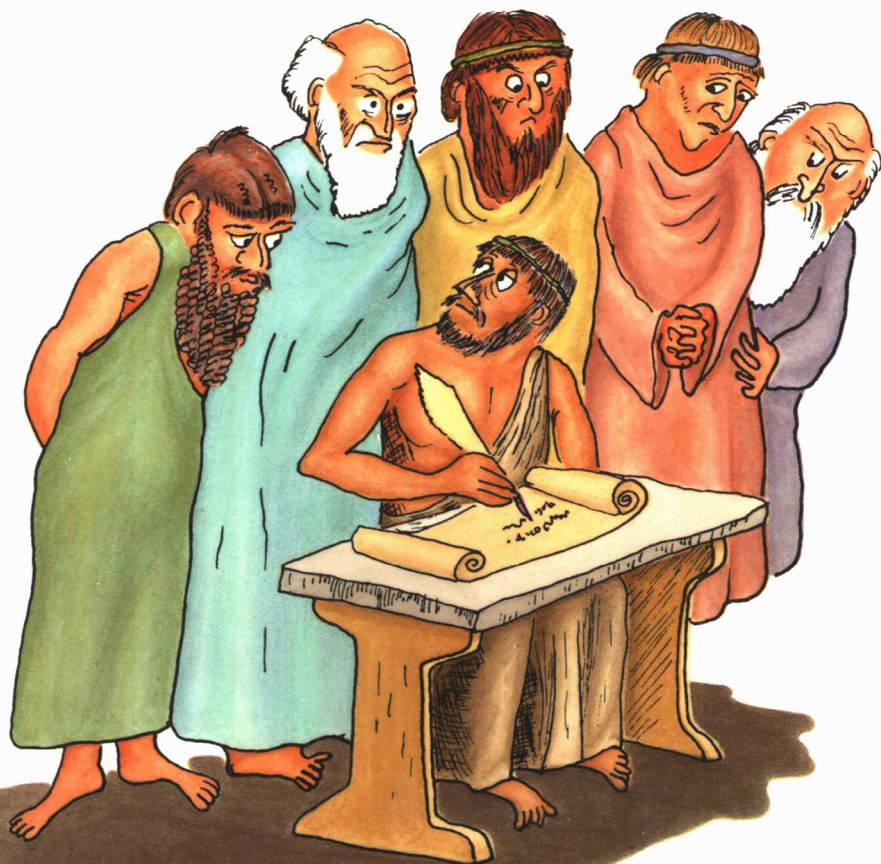


LOOKING AT PHILOSOPHY

The Unbearable Heaviness of
Philosophy Made Lighter

Second Edition

DONALD PALMER



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Second Edition

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College of Marin

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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. 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. Twenty 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, 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 those philosophers who have been dealt with in this book. Fortunately, things have begun to change in the last few years. An adequate account of contemporary philosophy could not in good faith ignore the major contributions to the analytic tradition of philosophers like 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 feminist 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, 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 feminist philosopher and with a question posed to philosophy herself, “Quo vadis?”—Whither goest thou?

The second edition of this book has involved numerous transformations. Several sections have been rewritten and there have been some corrections and several expansions. Additions include new segments on John Dewey and Martin Heidegger, and the book is brought more up to date by moving ahead from the 1950s to the 1970s. Also a short annotated bibliography has been added.

Finally, I want to say that I have had some help with both 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. Jim Bull, my editor at Mayfield Publishing Company, had faith in this project from its inception. He has provided unqualified support from its halting start to the completion of the second edition. My thanks to Sondra Glider and Robin Mouat of Mayfield's Production Department 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.

«»

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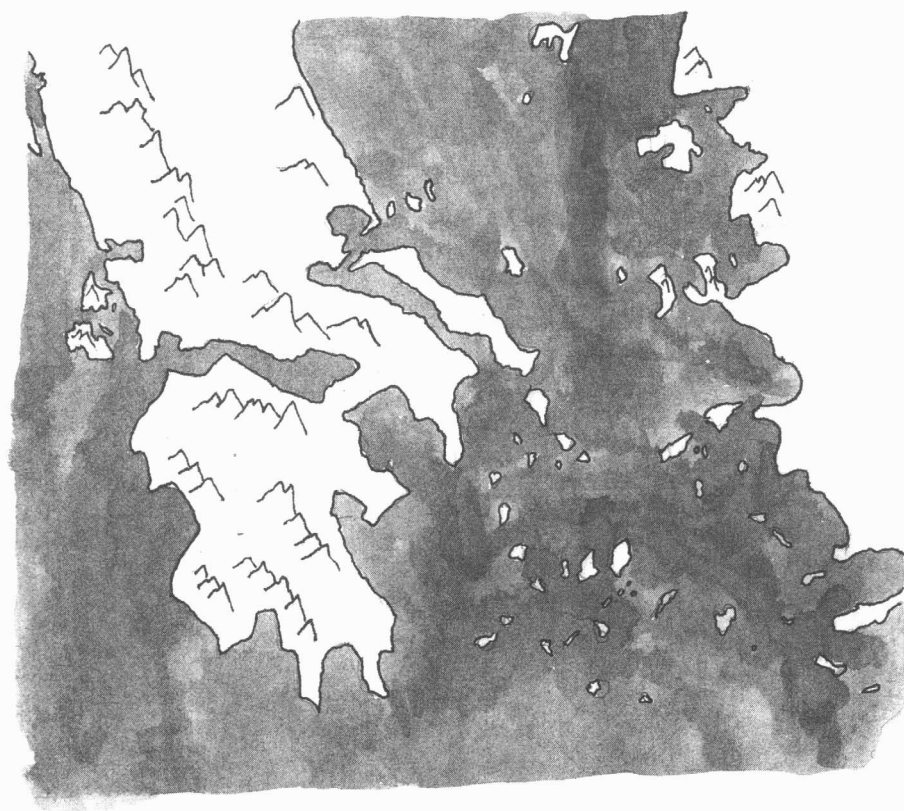
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INTRODUCTION

The story of Western philosophy begins in

GREECE



The Greek word LOGOS 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, this meant tracing them 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. Hence, they 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



Explaining Ancient Greek Customs

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. 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." In that case, Greece truly is the cradle of Western philosophy.



A Modern Myth?



Why Greece, and not, for example, Egypt or Judea?
Well, for one reason, there was no PRIESTLY CLASS of
CENSORS in Greece.



For another, the Greek imagination had always been fertile, and concerned with intimate detail. For example, Homer's description of Achilles' shield takes up four pages of the *Iliad*.



Furthermore, the Greeks were particularly aware 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.