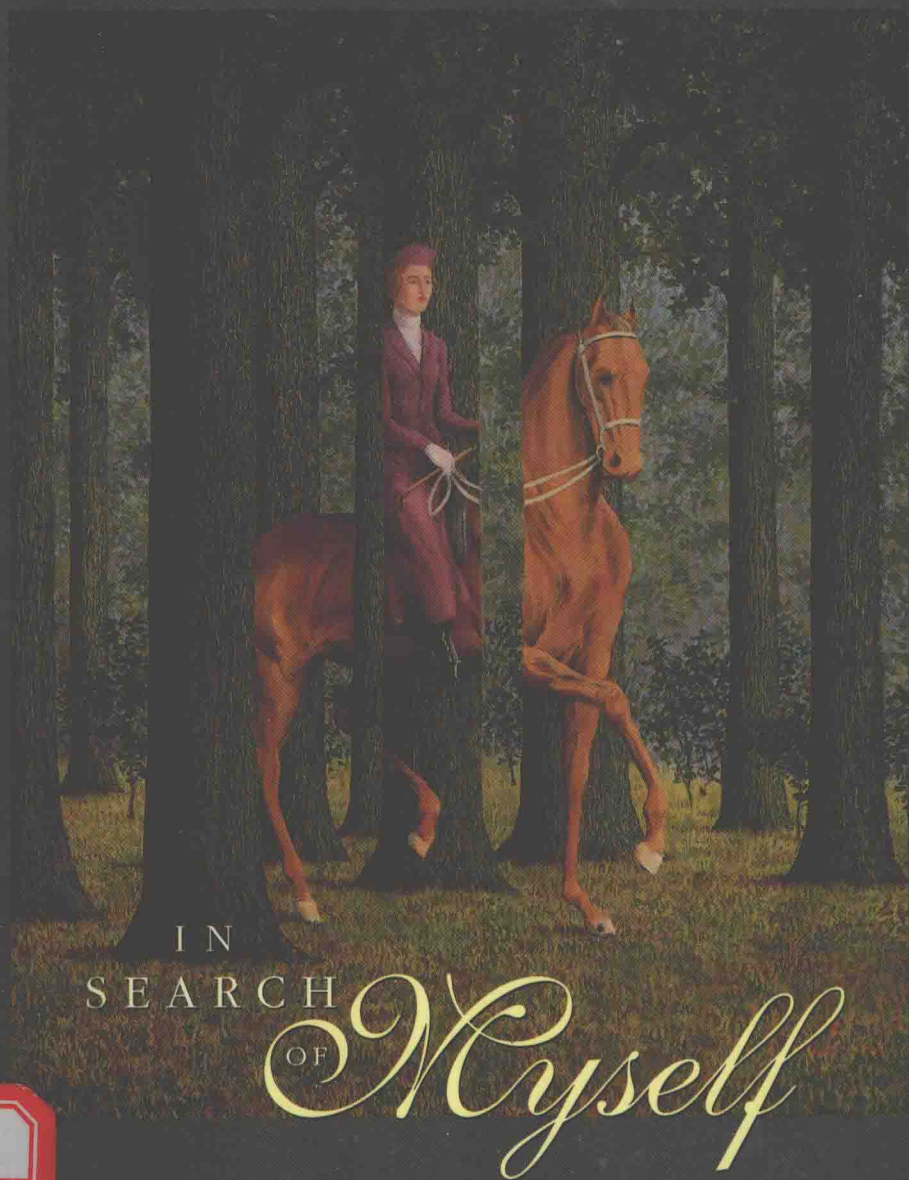


LIFE, DEATH, & PERSONAL IDENTITY



IN
SEARCH
OF *Myself*

DANIEL KOLAK

IN
SEARCH
OF
MYSELF:
LIFE, DEATH,
AND
PERSONAL
IDENTITY

DANIEL KOLAK

William Paterson University of New Jersey



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this book is dedicated to

Wendy Zentz Kolak

the woman of my dreams

By the same author:

Wisdom Without Answers

The Experience of Philosophy

Self & Identity

Self, Cosmos, God

Lovers of Wisdom

From Plato to Wittgenstein

One Thousand and One Questions

In Search of God: The Language and Logic of Belief

From the Presocratics to the Present: A Personal Odyssey

The Mayfield Anthology of Western Philosophy

Wittgenstein's Tractatus

Philosophy of Religion

Philosophy of Mind

Philosophy of Language

Philosophical Bridges

Foreword

This is a wonderful and unusual book. It is a novel in which the characters do, and literally, are, philosophy. To read this novel is to live philosophy for a while.

The book does not attempt to describe philosophy or even to describe doing it, but it *does* philosophy. It captures your imagination and interest. It makes you do philosophy through the novel form. It entices you to do a special kind of philosophy. This kind of philosophy is abstract, respectful of the need for arguments, distinctions and clarity but without at all being remote and dry. On the contrary, it is intensely personal.

This book is very appropriate for Introduction to Philosophy courses, because its prime virtue is that it directly engages you in a philosophical wrestle. Because the wrestle to understand is so personal, it should appeal to many different kinds of introductory courses in philosophy: contemporary and historical, East and West, analytic and continental, mystical and literary. But it can and should be read both by the general reader and the philosopher: anyone wishing to wake up from the slumbers of commonsense will find it indispensable.

There is no other book quite like this one. It is in a superficial sense similar to John Perry's *A Dialogue Concerning Personal Identity and Immortality*, the similarity is with respect to some of the themes, but Kolak's book is much

more engaging and entertaining. It has a plot. It will challenge readers. It is a novel which does philosophy. So this means it would appeal to teachers who would like to use literary texts as a part of their philosophy course. At the same time as having the advantages of the novel, they would not have to put up with the usual shortcomings: novels or short stories rarely contain arguments for and against positions; very seldom do novels directly concern philosophical themes. In that respect it has something in common with Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's World*. But Kolak's world is deeper and more profound.

This book is delightful and fun. I enjoyed it very much. It has many moods. Sometimes it is deadly earnest, funny and silly, complex, irreverent. It is often Kafka-like, except more disturbing. Kafka, unlike Kolak, had the luxury of knowing who he was.

Garrett Thomson
The College of Wooster

PREFACE

WHO AM I?

I too am untranslatable.

Walt Whitman

I AM A BOOK.

I do not know that I exist. I am not conscious. I am not wise. I have neither a life, nor will I die. I have no goals, desires, or fears.

But I do have an identity: I am this book and not some other. And I have a purpose. To enlighten you: to existence, to yourself, to philosophy.

Perhaps you have read many books, perhaps only just a few. It does not matter. I was written neither for the learned nor for the unlearned. I was written just for you.

I know nothing about you. Yet I am all about you. And though you may need me to find out who you are I need you even more. I need you to exist.

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sky. One from the east, the other from the west, they flew toward the center until they met at Delphi at a spot marked in the temple by a stone called *omphalos*, the navel of the world. I sit on the burning rock. Except for the distant chorus of the cicadas all is absolutely still and quiet.

I am alone. Without wind the heat is oppressive. I take a sip of cool water from my canteen and wipe my brow. Every now and then the cicadas stop and the silence is like an explosion.

An ancient sanctuary. Before me looms the temple of Apollo with its empty altar. My eyes trace along what once were 15 two-story columns along either side and 6 across each front to the small antechamber where nearly three thousand years ago a beautiful and wise woman bearing the title "oracle," the official voice of God, declared Socrates to be the wisest because he claimed to know nothing except how little he knew. The story, often used as the starting point of philosophy, is notably absent from the sculpted rocks, the surrounding mountain, the valley; it remembers itself sleepily within me. Neither her name nor his, nor their likenesses, appear anywhere. It makes me smile to realize that this place and I are inextricably linked. Without me there is no story. The place needs me to tell its story and I need it to help me to know . . . to discover, to remember, to decide . . . who I am.

The only human figures appear along a small temple-like building, with caryatids instead of columns, carved in beautifully preserved metopes depicting the adventures of Theseus and Heracles. I think of the labyrinth and Ariadne, of the 12 Labors of that first son of God. Along with a hymn

to Apollo, accompanied by musical notation, scratched into that wall by unknown hands over three millennia ago, there is a message to us. To you and to me.

The ancient inscription is well known. Socrates, who wrote nothing, declared it to be his one and only dictum, what he lived by and what he died by. Two words. Unlike the images which come to this place through the memory that has somehow wound its way here through me, the ancient message needs no story and no storyteller. The writing is on the wall, literally, preserved for anyone who happens to follow this tortuous path through the cleft between these rocks:

“Know Yourself.”

I get up and walk to the wall. Standing in the crisp, dark shadow I run my fingers along the Greek letters. I say the words aloud: “*gnothi s’afton.*” *Know yourself.* I close my eyes and breathe in an invisible hive of energy, the air throbbing from the carmine-winged grasshoppers, the locusts, the thousand buzzing insects who even in their collective unities cannot find a common beat, though their songs remain the same.

Here, in this sacred place, there is no philosophy. The sun obliterates it, the air you breathe extinguishes it, the ten thousand nights of learned study vanish in the windless, thirsty heat. It took thousands of years for the treasures that once lined every corner of this place to vanish, for the ceilings to fall, the walls to crumble; all your theories and your thoughts vanish in an instant.

You open your eyes and now you are empty of your deeds, your degrees, your sweet pedantries. There is just this

place, this remarkable, incredible place that once was Greece.
And here you are, all alone, face to face with two words left
over from what once was the center of the world:

Know Yourself.

ONE

DESCARTES

AMONG

THE

RUINS

*I know that I exist, and I inquire what I am, I
whom I know to exist.*

René Descartes

NIGHTFALL. I RETRIEVE MY BACKPACK from the *tholos*, a round building of unknown purpose, and make my way back along the colonnade into the temple. I will sleep in the antechamber where the Oracle once made her pronouncements. I take out my blanket and unroll it next to the back wall.

Above me the sky turns iridescent; a new crescent moon peeks at me over the edge of the ruin. The cicadas have not stopped but a new chorus of night locusts joins their tumult. A salamander scuttles into a crevice in the wall. I hear treefrogs. Lying on my back, staring up into the firmament, I try to sleep. It is too early, the stars too many and too bright; I cannot. The stillness sizzles. The darkness is full of everything.

Moonrise. The silver light swallows the stars and returns them to the sky undigested. The temple and I lie silently beneath the chiaroscuro spectacle, afloat in a sea of insect sound. A sweet saffronlike smell of flowers wallows in the warm evening breeze.

I feel strangely restless in my tired calm. A night bird, high overhead, croaks primevally in the stars. The crickets chirp. A single black cloud, thin as a razor, races across the face of the moon.

Suddenly I heard a sound echo faintly from the steep hillside. It came again, louder. A primitive timbre. An ancient instrument? I sat up. Again that sound. I stood up and looked over the side wall: ash-lilac mountains, cypress trees, moonshadows; a strange, crepuscular light. A hornpipe? When again I turned to look I saw a woman sitting up on the high wall, a majestic and beautiful figure in a flowing robe. Her skin glowed marboreally against the sky, a translucent silhouette beneath the crescent moon. Across her breasts the Greek letters Π and Θ were sewn into the tightly threaded fabric, one above the other, with degrees marked between them like the rungs of a ladder. In her right hand she held books; in her left, a scepter.

“Who are you? How did you get up there!”

Her eyes locked on me. I had never been looked at like that before, at least not by a human being. By an insect or animal, perhaps, poised and predatory, single minded, reptilian.

“You do not recognize me?”

Atop her flows of long black hair I caught a glint of golden laurel leaves.

“You are Philosophy,” I said. “The Goddess of Wisdom, the one who consoled Boethius before his death.” I smiled. “Except you don’t exist.”

“Why not?”

“Because I do.”

“How do you know?”

“I think, therefore I am,” I laughed.

“Oh, René,” she cooed seductively, “I too can think.”

I shook my head. “I think, therefore you do not.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because this is a dream.”

She put down the books and scepter. “You’ve come to the right place.” With the slightest tilt forward she glided down off the high wall, in slow motion, a wingless bird. “What makes you think this is a dream?”

“You flew! You just flew!”

“Ah. So you reason thus: I see a goddess fly, therefore, I must be dreaming?”

“I know Goddesses do not exist. Therefore I reason, correctly, that I am dreaming a most extraordinary dream, that I converse with an apparition, a figment of my imagination.”

"Do I look like a figment of your imagination?"

"Not at all." Staring into her fiery eyes I felt an eerie presence. How strange to look at eyes and believe they are not eyes, that there is no one there behind them. Behind my own eyes I wondered: what eyes am I seeing her with? "I admit I am dumbfounded. Doubly so. A realistic and lucid dream such as this, in which I find myself experiencing apparitions with the clearness and distinctness of waking life disturbs me exactly the way in waking life I should fear for my sanity were experience suddenly to turn tenuous, disjointed, discontinuous--"

"Tell me, then, who wrote these words:

I perceive so clearly that there exist no certain marks by which the state of waking can ever be distinguished from sleep, that I feel greatly astonished; and in amazement I almost persuade myself that I am now dreaming."¹

I smiled. "The words are mine."

She smiled back. "Well, then?"

"I was making a philosophical point. Except for extraordinary cases such as this, dreams usually are less vivid, they lack continuity, they are not as bright--"

"But think, my dear René, think: if objects in dreams appeared to you as such you would not run from them, engage with them, talk with them. You would instead say: look at those insubstantial images! How could you be deceived by something that announces itself as an appearance and says, outright, 'I am a deception?' That you ever are deceived should thus alert you to this deep and fundamental truth."

“What - that I can’t distinguish dream from reality?”

“That even the most distinguished philosopher deceives himself with the distinction.”

“Between dream and reality?”

“As surely as between himself and others.”

What a bizarre and amusing twist, I thought, in one move to thus challenge within myself the distinction between dream and reality and between self and other; in waking life I had gone the other way around in two moves to find what I had thought was absolute certainty. But perhaps I had succeeded only with the intellect. Did not the very fact of this dream suggest hidden doubts still lingered deep within my soul?²

“I will wake up and you will disappear,” I said. “That’s the difference between you and me, between dream and reality. You don’t exist in the real world.”

“What world is that?”

“The world outside my mind.”

“You know any such world, René? How! By what experience?”

“Not by experience. By reason.”

“Ah. By reason you mean by argument, by which you mean by strings of sentences, by which you mean by strings of words? Then by what you know you must mean not world but theory. For that is to what your words connect you: not to the world in which your being is inscribed but to descriptions, narratives, a story.”

“The real world is not a story.”

“The real world does not exist, except in stories.”

“That’s what this is.”