

JOHN MARMYSZ

THE PATH OF PHILOSOPHY

EARLY GREEK AND ROMAN



The Path of Philosophy

The Path of Philosophy

Truth, Wonder, and Distress

JOHN MARMYSZ

College of Marin



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Truth, Wonder, and Distress
John Marmysz**

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Preface

The Path of Philosophy: Truth, Wonder, and Distress began as a guidebook written for my Introduction to Philosophy students at Corning Community College and the College of Marin. Over the many years that I have revised and polished this work, it has evolved into something more than a college textbook. In addition to offering an accessible and readable introduction to Western philosophy, this book also provides a critical perspective on the history of philosophy. This is a text that has been tested in the classroom but which will also be of interest to the educated reading public outside of the classroom.

The Path of Philosophy traces the history of Western thought from its beginnings in ancient Greece to contemporary developments in the Postmodern world. In this work, I have attempted to demonstrate how philosophy is unique and distinct from religion and science, while at the same time showing how all three disciplines are interrelated and woven together. The unique essence of philosophy, I argue, lies in its commitment to Truth, its enthusiasm for raising questions, and its willingness to defer final answers to those questions. By examining the arguments and contributions of influential figures from the Ancient, Medieval, Modern, and Postmodern periods, I show how philosophical thinking has historically served as a motivation for the pursuit of new developments in science, religion, and philosophy itself. Despite its successes, in the end, philosophical thinking always falls short of its real goal. It involves both the wonder of aspiring toward Truth and the distress of falling short of that Truth. In this way, philosophy can be characterized as wondrous distress.

Unlike many other introductory texts, *The Path of Philosophy* sustains a coherent and ongoing narrative throughout its length. I have written the book so that it tells a story in which particular philosophers appear as important participants. Rather than treating each thinker in isolation, I show how Western thinkers have built upon and critiqued one another's work. One reason for constructing the book in this manner is to counter the mistaken idea that philosophizing involves little more than brashly stating one's own opinion. I also hope

to reverse a common impression that the study of philosophy is only focused on the analytical dissection of arguments and worldviews that have little, if any, relationship to one another. Rather, I have tried to show that philosophers are embedded in an ongoing tradition, and that there is a continuity of thinking in the West that explores and articulates an enduring, and insatiable, aspiration toward Truth and the comprehension of Being itself. In emphasizing this aspect of philosophical thinking, I have written a book that is unusual in its cohesiveness and that leaves readers with a vivid picture of philosophy as an extraordinary and spiritually important field of study.

The narrative structure of this book also serves the purpose of providing students with a framework within which they can contextualize and understand many of the primary works that are normally read in introductory philosophy courses. This book simplifies and explains those ideas and arguments, putting them into a context that helps readers to understand the interconnections between the thoughts of different philosophers over time. In addition, this book establishes the historical scaffolding necessary to appreciate and to make sense of thinkers outside of the scope of the work itself. It should be noted that this text, while spanning the whole history of philosophy in the West, is not intended as an encyclopedic catalogue of philosophers and their philosophies. I have carefully selected the thinkers who appear in this book to illustrate and clarify the theme of wondrous distress. In this way, the book attempts to walk a line between comprehensiveness and depth. Some books, in their attempt to be comprehensive, fail to linger with the important issues and arguments that make philosophy profound. Other books, in their attempt to be conceptually deep, fail to offer a panorama of the philosophical and historical landscape. This book walks a middle path between those two extremes.

An important feature that makes this book unique and accessible is the inclusion of original illustrations throughout each of the sections. These illustrations are the work of Juneko Robinson, and they provide vivid, moving, and often humorous depictions of the characters, events, and themes that are dealt with in this book. It may be a cliché to write “a picture is worth a thousand words,” but in the case of Juneko Robinson’s drawings, this is certainly the case. Her illustrations concretize some rather difficult and abstract concepts, thus providing the reader with a useful tool that assists in the comprehension of important ideas. Having worked closely with Juneko in the conceptualization of these drawings, I am delighted with the final product and amazed by her skill at bringing ideas to life. Her artistry and vision are integral parts of this work’s composition.

Each chapter contains boxed features that amplify certain details appearing in the main body of the text and that point out connections to contemporary issues and topics. These features direct readers’ attention to other books, films, events, and occurrences in popular culture that are relevant to the topics covered. In combination with numerous tables, diagrams, and illustrations, these boxed features impart a lively, entertaining, and visually interesting appearance to the text that will help students to understand the ongoing debates, questions, and controversies that are an integral part of philosophizing. Also included in each chapter

are discussion questions that encourage students to draw their own connections and to relate the material to their own personal experiences and concerns.

I hope that *The Path of Philosophy: Truth, Wonder, and Distress* will serve as a useful, entertaining, and substantial introduction to the wondrous and distressing field of philosophical thinking. Those of us who have devoted our lives to philosophy know that in this discipline there is always more to explore, that there are always conflicting perspectives, and that there is never a final, authoritative verdict on how to interpret key issues. In giving expression to the wondrous distress of philosophical thinking, I hope that I have provided readers with something valuable that inspires them in their own search for Truth.



Acknowledgments

The Path of Philosophy: Truth, Wonder, and Distressis dedicated to the memory of my mother, Frances Marmysz. Without her, I would not be, and so neither would this book.

This book is the culmination of 10 years of thinking, discussing, teaching, studying, and writing. Over the course of these years, it has evolved and changed into something much more ambitious than it initially was intended to be. At the start, the chapters in this book were conceived as weekly lectures to be posted in my online Introduction to Philosophy classes, which I began teaching at Corning Community College in 2001. My first debt of gratitude, therefore, is to the students at CCC who indulged me as I started to articulate in writing the ideas found herein.

Corning Community College offered an atmosphere of collegiality without which this book's development would have been very difficult, if not impossible. My second debt of gratitude is thus to the faculty and staff at CCC who offered encouragement and support during the early phases of this book's conceptualization. In particular, I must thank Andrea Rubin, then chair of the Humanities and Communications Division, for her confidence in me and my work. Andrea's willingness to take the time to talk with me and offer her sincere and honest advice concerning issues both professional and personal helped to make my tenure at CCC both productive and fulfilling. Andrea, as I have told her often, is the best boss I have ever had. I also am grateful to Professor Vince Lisella, who was a good friend to me while I was at Corning, helping me to feel like I belonged even when I was unsure if I did. I will always cherish my memories of our philosophical conversations, and the passion, humor, and playfulness that Vince devotes to his thinking and teaching. Vince has helped me to pursue many ideas through to their end, including a number of those that appear in these pages. He is one of the best teachers I have ever met. Finally, I thank Professor Byron Shaw, who kindly took the time to read through and offer suggestions on an early draft of this text. Byron made me feel that this was a project worth undertaking.

The staff outside of the CCC Humanities Division were also extremely supportive and helpful as I began to get this project off the ground. A big boost of financial help came from CCC's Center for Professional Development, which granted me funding to commission some of the first original drawings by Juneko Robinson that accompany this text. I thank Les Rosenbloom and Joanne Moone, both of the Center for Professional Development, for their enthusiasm and belief in this project. No less important were all of the staff and faculty members at CCC who honored me with a SUNY Chancellor's Award for Scholarship and Creativity. This sign of their appreciation and respect will always be important to me, and it was a vital shot in the arm that helped me to retain my confidence and enthusiasm.

Andrea Rubin and Byron Shaw were also instrumental in helping me to secure a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Fellowship for the summer of 2005, during which I was able to further research, think through, and polish the ideas in Chapter 11. I thank Andrea, Byron, and the NEH for the opportunity this fellowship gave me to participate in a six-week seminar titled "Terror and Culture: Revisiting Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*," held at Stanford University and led by Russell A. Berman and Julia C. Hell. I also thank the participants in that seminar, especially Scott Lukas, for helpful criticisms and input.

In 2005, I left CCC and accepted a position at the College of Marin, in Marin County, California, where I now teach philosophy. At COM, I have continued to be encouraged by supervisors, peers, and students. I therefore thank the numerous students from my Introduction to Philosophy courses at COM who have read and offered comments on the evolving versions of these chapters; in particular, Mike Williamson and Pietro Poggi. I also thank David Rollison, John Sutherland, David Snyder, and Janet Macintosh, all members of the COM English/Humanities Division, for their advice and concern with this project.

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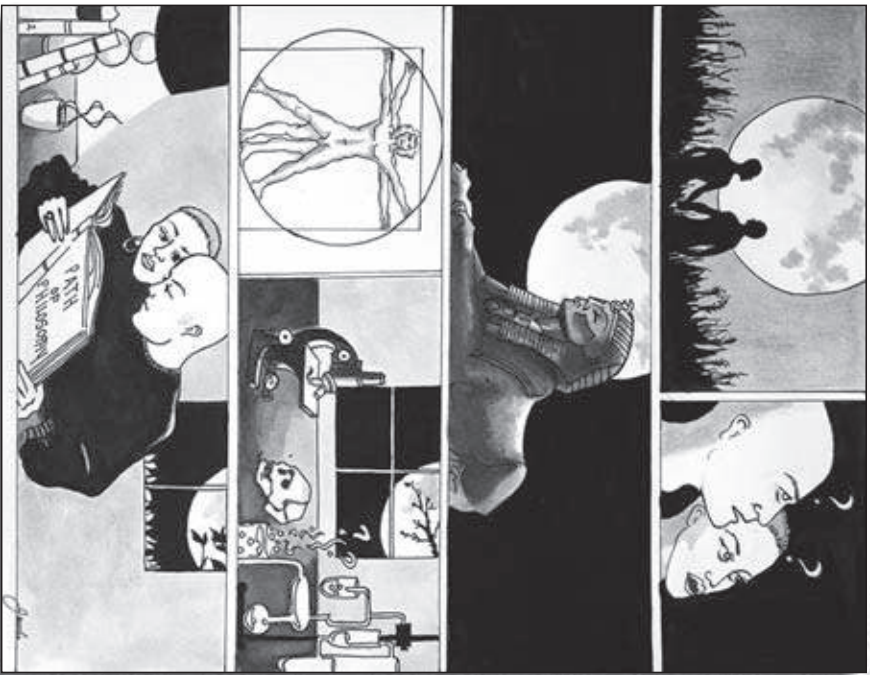
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Introduction



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What is philosophy? What are the differences between analytic and continental styles of philosophizing? What is the relationship between religion, science, and philosophy? In what sense can philosophy be characterized as a kind of “wondrous distress”?

The study of philosophy is so varied and diverse in terms of its subject matter and in terms of the tools that are used to address that subject matter that it is virtually impossible to sum up in a neat and tidy fashion just what the field is all about. To complicate matters, the term “philosophy” can be, and is, appended to just about every other area of study. If you examine the catalogue of any major university, you are likely to come across courses with titles like “Philosophy of Science,” “Philosophy of Religion,” “Philosophy of Mathematics,” “Philosophy of Art,” “Philosophy of Technology,” “Philosophy of Life,” and on and on. It seems as if there is a philosophy of everything; perhaps even a philosophy of philosophy! Just what is it that all of these wide-ranging areas of study have in common?

An introduction to philosophy would do a disservice if it glossed over the controversies, the complexities, the disagreements, and the infighting that occur within the discipline. It is sometimes said that philosophy is the only academic domain in which practitioners are uncertain about what it is that they are studying. If you look at the field as a whole, this assertion is not so outlandish at all. Many philosophers do not agree among themselves what the proper scope of philosophical inquiry encompasses, or what tools are appropriate to it, and so we find an ongoing (and sometimes divisive and nasty) debate carried out within professional philosophy concerning its proper focus.

ANALYTIC AND CONTINENTAL STYLES OF PHILOSOPHIZING

For instance, in the contemporary world, one of the most pronounced and contentious divisions in philosophy has become that between the so-called “analytic” style of philosophizing and the so-called “continental” style of philosophizing. From the analytic camp we learn that the proper task of philosophy is to use the tools of logic and analysis to clarify and define problems, ultimately with an eye toward solving (or dissolving) those problems, thus providing us with clear and definitive answers to the questions that we have about the universe and our place in it. Philosophy, in this view, is closely allied with science, and its goal is thought to be the elimination of mystery and ignorance as well as the promotion of the progressive growth of human knowledge. In the words of Brian Leiter, one of the most vigorous proponents of the analytic style of philosophy in America today, “Analytic philosophers, crudely speaking, aim for argumentative clarity and precision; draw freely on the tools of logic; and often identify, professionally and intellectually, more closely with the sciences and mathematics, than with the humanities.”¹ One of the central elements binding this category of philosophers together, and from which they take the name “analytic philosophy,” is the emphasis on analysis. From this perspective, the job of philosophy is, by and large, to isolate and break apart particular issues and questions into manageable pieces so that they may be clarified and systematically scrutinized according to the procedures of logic and science. Just as scientists

narrowly focus on clearly defined problems, according to the analytic perspective philosophers should likewise direct their attention toward issues that can be broken up into well-defined bits and pieces, which can then be addressed in isolation from other peripheral concerns. Philosophy, in this view, should treat the world as composed of pieces that can be taken apart and understood bit by bit. As in the natural sciences, analytic philosophers believe that progress is possible in philosophy if individual thinkers just commit to specializing in a particular area, focus their energies on individual problems, and then contribute their findings to the collective wisdom of the field.

From the continental camp, on the other hand, we learn that philosophy is not so much about logic and analysis as it is about ongoing contemplation and meditation on the grandest mysteries in the universe. In this view, philosophy should not be overly focused on providing unequivocal answers to questions. Rather, it should be content with lingering upon the enigmas and complexities of human experience, even if no answers are ever forthcoming. Here, philosophy is presented as more closely allied with the humanities, and as in art, literature, and cultural criticism, continental thinkers claim that focus should fall on exploring and appreciating the full depth of human experience. Bruce Wilshire, a passionate contemporary American critic of analytic thought and a proponent of the continental style of philosophy, writes:

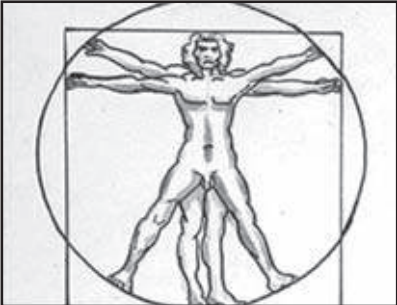

I understand philosophy in a traditional way. It is an activity the ultimate aim of which is to keep us open to the unencompassable, the domain of what we don't know we don't know. An obvious corollary is to strive to make our assumptions as clear and as grounded in experience as it is possible for us to make them. For our assumptions are just that: assumptions, which we formulate within a universe we cannot encompass in thought. Analytic philosophy tends to so sharply focus that it seals us from the vague but all-important background presence of the universe.²

The term “continental” stems from a tradition of philosophy that can be traced back to nineteenth-century thinkers from the European continent; in particular, certain post-Kantian thinkers like Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. These thinkers were less concerned with the technicalities of logic and more literary in their approach to philosophizing. Though it is difficult to find a single element uniting all of the thinkers who today are classified as continental, they tend to have less faith in science, more interest in the history of ideas, and exhibit more of a tendency to engage in metaphysical speculation than analytic thinkers. Continental philosophers treat philosophy as an ongoing project in which the human thinker stands in awe of the universe and its overwhelming excess. Because the universe is so uncanny, it cannot be unambiguously or easily comprehended by breaking it into bits and pieces using logic or science. Thus, it is a common tendency of continental thinkers to critique logic and science as historically contingent devices that oversimplify, and thus cover over, the true nature of the world. For continental thinkers, deep contemplation seems more important than scientific progress or unequivocal answers.

Analytic thinkers often charge continental thinkers with being fuzzy-headed and mixed up. Because they do not emphasize problem-solving and the assertion of final conclusions, it is sometimes complained that continental philosophers are incomprehensible, equivocal, and purposefully opaque. Why can't they just say what they mean in a clear, straightforward fashion?! On the other hand, continental philosophers often charge analytic thinkers with being shallow and overly glib. Because the analytic tradition emphasizes solving problems and coming to clear conclusions, it is charged that analytic philosophers don't always take the time to linger with grander, "eternal issues" to appreciate the full depth, complexity, and mystery of human existence.

In this contemporary philosophical battle, we get the taste of an ongoing controversy that always has, and probably always will, be present in the field of philosophy. On the one hand, philosophers desire answers to questions. They pursue their inquiries because they want to make discoveries and come to know something about themselves and the world in which they live. On the other hand, some of the most important and enduring questions that humans ask themselves are of a sort that resist being answered. These questions have persisted precisely because human thought is too limited to fully comprehend the scope and depth of the issues that are involved. What is the meaning of life? Does God exist? What is Truth? What is Goodness? What is ultimately real? These sorts of questions may be unanswerable by anyone but a god, yet they are nonetheless among the most important and enduring questions, meriting contemplation regardless of whether or not we can produce answers to them.

TABLE INTRO. 1 Continental versus Analytic Philosophy

	
Continental Philosophy	Analytic Philosophy
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tends to be aligned with the humanities 2. Tends to be more literary in style 3. Tends to be more friendly to the open-ended contemplation and exploration of human experience 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tends to be aligned with the sciences 2. Tends to emphasize the use of logic 3. Tends to focus on defining terms, resolving issues, and establishing answers to questions

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THE LOVE OF WISDOM

Ironically, it is through the quarrels and disagreements of experts in the field that we can start to get an initial sense of what is essential, as well as what is non-essential, to the study of philosophy. Because those who engage in philosophical exploration don't necessarily agree on the subject matter or tools that are appropriate to their discipline, we might start to suspect that the essence of philosophy does not lie in a particular subject matter or in a particular set of tools at all. It may be that the essence of philosophy has less to do with subject matter and technique and more to do with something else. If this is the case, then trying to understand what philosophy is will require that we look past the superficial differences among particular philosophers and instead try to uncover the deeper similarities that both unite philosophers as philosophers and that separate philosophers from experts in other fields of study such as science and religion.

Among philosophers of all descriptions and dispositions there are a few characteristics that do seem to recur again and again, giving shape to a recognizable way of thinking that we call "philosophical." Part of the task of this book is to draw attention to those recurrent characteristics as they appear in the history of Western civilization. What we will find as our investigation progresses is that philosophy is, at the very least, a mode of thinking that is characterized by an enthusiasm for raising questions as well as a willingness to defer final answers to those questions in the quest for absolute Truth.

The term "philosophy" comes from two Greek words: *philos* and *sophia*. *Philos* means "love of." *Sophia* means "wisdom." The term "philosophy," then, literally means "the love of wisdom." It was the ancient Greek philosopher, mathematician, and religious figure Pythagoras who first coined this term. For Pythagoras, the study of the world was not simply a detached and academic exercise. Rather, it was an integral part of a much larger project that was focused on self-discovery and the aspiration toward personal perfection. As the genius who formulated the Pythagorean Theorem and the mathematical description of harmonies, and as the leader of a mystical religious cult, Pythagoras had, during his lifetime, developed a reputation as a very smart, profound, and spiritual figure. However, when asked by a fellow citizen whether he thought himself wise, Pythagoras is reported to have responded, "No, I only love wisdom."

Pythagoras' coinage of the term "philosophy," then, seems to have been intended as a way of articulating his *attitude* toward Truth and Wisdom. He didn't claim to be wise, in fact, but only to be a *philosopher* in the sense that he aspired toward, and loved, wisdom. If we follow him in this usage, then philosophy would turn out to be not so much a closed body of knowledge as an attitude of care and curiosity about what is true, good, and lasting. In fact, to be a philosopher, as we will see is the case with Socrates and the Skeptics, one need not know anything at all. One need only be willing to cultivate an attitude of openness to speculation and reflection concerning the world's mysteries. Philosophy is a quest and a process that inquires into and probes reality, asking questions about the world and our place in it. The philosopher is thus not an individual who knows Truth but rather an individual who strives toward, and is curious about,

the undiscovered truths (or Truth) of the universe. It might even be said that as soon as one claims to have discovered final answers to the mysteries of the world, one ceases to be a philosopher. “No god is a philosopher or a seeker after wisdom,” writes Plato,³ because gods already know everything. Humans, however, do not know everything, and as long as they continue to aspire toward wisdom, Truth, and knowledge they remain philosophical creatures. If this is correct, then we can already see that the analytic and the continental perspectives on philosophy each have a part, but only a part, of the picture in proper focus. To be a philosopher is to be caught between the desire for answers and the realization that no answer is final. It is a way of thinking that is ambitious in its aspiration toward a perfect understanding of the world yet modest in its recognition of how far we must always fall short of this goal.

RELIGION, SCIENCE, AND PHILOSOPHY

Historically, philosophical thinking has had uneasy, though often fruitful, relationships with other forms of thinking. We can start to get a sense of these relationships if we take a brief moment to look at the distinction between philosophy, science, and religion. Over the course of this book we will trace the manner in which these modes of thinking are interconnected, and one of the major themes that will resound is the critical role played by philosophical thinking as a spur or motivation toward progress and development in other fields of human knowledge. It is clear that to expand and develop, it is necessary for the practitioners in an area of expertise to question, wonder, and speculate about things unknown and undiscovered. But this, in turn, requires an admission of ignorance concerning some of the very things that one seeks to explain. Both science and religion, therefore, require the sort of openness that is involved in philosophical thinking if they are to constantly move forward. Eliminate the philosophical elements of a field of study and it stagnates, or even worse, becomes corrupt.

Take, for instance, the field of religion. Like philosophers, religious thinkers probe and question reality, looking for the Truth behind the world’s appearances. However, what makes religious thinkers distinctive is their claim that sacred texts or prophets and wise men hold the authority to reveal supernatural truths about existence. The religious thinker, in this way, differs from the philosopher who does not necessarily accept the authority of revelation but rather remains committed to ongoing questioning and



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the probing of Being itself in spite of, and sometimes in contradiction to, the proclamations and assertions of authority figures. The history of religious thinking is textured with conflicts between those believers who rely solely on faith and those who question their faith by reflecting philosophically on the nature and

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