

*Founders of Western Philosophy: Thales to Hume*  
a 12-lecture course  
by

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**Lecture 1**  
**THE FIRST PROBLEM:**  
**ARE THERE ANY ABSOLUTES?**

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**The Jefferson School**  
of Philosophy, Economics, and Psychology

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## Editor's Note

Anyone who has heard Leonard Peikoff speak knows the experience of being held fascinated for hours while being challenged to grasp substantial new knowledge—and the significant increase in his mental efficacy which results.

In his history of philosophy courses, Dr. Peikoff selects the essential material to give the student an overall mental map of the history of philosophy. He brings each viewpoint into full focus by laser-like identifications of its principles and by luminously clear examples. Always, he explains why the viewpoint is important to the listener's own life. And by drama and humor, he makes the whole process fun.

In light of such virtues, my goal as editor of these lectures is simply to translate them to readable form, while retaining their entire content. In essence, this requires only that I remove from the lectures the extra words inherent in oral delivery. My hope is that the reader has listened to at least one taped lecture by Leonard Peikoff, so that, as I do, he will hear Dr. Peikoff's voice in his mind as he reads. In this way, the printed version will serve as a lecture course while also providing the advantages of the written word.

Included at the back of this booklet are two supplementary resources: some study questions, to aid the reader in the necessary step of putting the lecture material into his own words; and a list of books for further reading, as recommended by Dr. Peikoff in this first lecture's question period. Dr. Reisman and I hope eventually to offer the question periods in written form. For now, however, we thought it most important to bring you, at the earliest opportunity, these superlative lectures themselves.

LINDA REARDAN

August 1994

## Preface

I am very pleased that my History of Philosophy lectures are being edited by Linda Reardan for publication by Professor George Reisman. Based on my recognition of Linda Reardan's knowledge and integrity, I have every reason to believe that the editorial changes she makes will be true to the lectures' essential content.

I must, however, tell readers at the outset that I myself have not read, let alone evaluated, this printed version, and could not undertake such time-consuming work at this stage of my career. The job of moving from oral material to written has been done with my permission and approval but without my participation. Hence I am unable to state of my own first-hand knowledge the accuracy of every editorial change.

Let me also add that these lectures were given originally in the late fifties and sixties, and that I have not heard the tapes since then. In thirty years, my understanding of philosophy (and of Objectivism) has grown substantially. This too may be a source of error in the present version. I am confident that, in fundamental terms, these lectures remain valid; but I also know that, were I to prepare them from scratch at this point in my life, I would in many ways do the job differently.

LEONARD PEIKOFF  
August 1994

## Publisher's Preface

I attended Leonard Peikoff's lectures on the history of philosophy over thirty years ago, when he delivered them in person in New York City. They very quickly established him in my mind as the very best lecturer I had ever heard. His words were brilliant, and his style of delivery was dazzling. I knew that these lectures were profoundly important, representing as they did, and still do, the Objectivist view on all of the essential doctrines of all of the major philosophers of history. The lectures I refer to are, of course, those that have come to be known as Dr. Peikoff's two series on the subject, respectively titled *Founders of Western Philosophy: Thales to Hume* and *Modern Philosophy: Kant to the Present*.

During all of the time since I heard those lectures, I also knew that it was essential that they appear in *written form*, so that their content could be carefully studied and pondered, and thus be truly digested. Ultimately, after several attempts, I prevailed on Dr. Peikoff to allow me to arrange for their publication.

In this endeavor, I was extremely fortunate to find Linda Reardan, who is a philosopher in her own right, available and eager to transcribe and edit the lectures. I can think of no one more qualified for this vital work.

I am pleased and honored now to be able to present the first of Dr. Peikoff's lectures out of a total of twenty-four, and to do so under the auspices of The Jefferson School, which was established precisely for such purposes. I believe that it and the lectures that will follow it in this format constitute one of the most important projects that could possibly be undertaken on behalf of the understanding and application of Objectivism.

I am confident that the reader will share my appraisal of Dr. Peikoff and the importance of his work in this area even before he finishes reading this first lecture. For I know of nowhere else

that this subject is presented with a sense of drama and suspense rivalling that of a first-class detective story, as it is here. I expect that many readers, after reading Dr. Peikoff's account of the views of Heraclitus and Parmenides will be virtually on the edge of their seats awaiting the answers that only Aristotle will be able to provide—but, alas, only in a later lecture.

GEORGE REISMAN

August 1994

# Lecture 1

## THE FIRST PROBLEM: ARE THERE ANY ABSOLUTES?

### 1. Why Study the History of Philosophy?

**I**magine that you have just taken a trip to Mars. You encounter there a race of men like us in all physical and psychological respects, except for one peculiar thing: they walk not on their feet, but on their hands. Of course, this is utterly senseless. Their hands are torn and bleeding; their hearts are pounding: it is a misery-invoking, widespread insanity. Your first question would be: Why? What could explain this kind of behavior?

Holding this image in mind, take a look at our world on earth.

In the realm of art, you find that painting's dominant school presents smears (which one art historian divides into two categories: the neat ones and the messy ones). Modern music offers a progression of unintelligible noises; and a good deal of modern literature consists of an unintelligible succession of letters of the alphabet. The theater alternates between characters in garbage cans and characters taking part in orgies with the audience.

In the realm of education, you find teachers militantly against teaching and in favor of social adjustment and/or student power. They are opposed to the teaching of facts or principles and laws; they regard thinking as abnormal; and they tell little Johnny to express his feelings—with the result that he cannot read.

In the realm of religion, you find some three hundred warring sects, all claiming insight by means of revelation into their version of the other dimension. One of the crucial conflicts in the field is between the Orient, where they worship various types of

animals, and the West, where they worship the pope. You find that the latest development in Christian theology, in avowed Christian theology, is the view that God is dead. And astronauts, representatives of the age of atomic energy and space travel, broadcast *Genesis* from outer space.

In the realm of science—modern science—one school tells us that cause and effect no longer holds, another that the theory of light has refuted the law of identity. Most spokesmen say that science is based on arbitrary presuppositions, that it is no more objectively valid than is religion. And many pronounce that natural laws do not exist, only statistics—while a few chime in with the latest “discovery”: that electrons move from one place to another without traversing the space in between.

This is just a brief sample of the world today. And what are the results of this rampant irrationality? If you look at psychology, you find the percentage of people with neurosis or psychosis in the West reaching epidemic proportions. If you look at politics, you see the escalating violence, the threat of nuclear war, the vicious and senseless political murders, and the West’s relentless march toward some version of fascism or communism.

If you want a philosophical barometer of the state of a culture, consider three questions: What do people regard as certain? What do they regard as realistic? And what do they regard as human? Today we are told that nothing is certain but death and taxes—and the skeptics are not even sure of that. We are told that the characters of Tennessee Williams, or the ones in garbage cans, are realistic, but *Cyrano de Bergerac* is not. And we would be told that Eleanor Roosevelt is human, but John Galt is not.

I submit that all of this is crazier than the Mars example I began with, and that the question, therefore, is: Why?

But the situation is more complex than I have described: there are also good things, great things—rational things—in the world, and particularly in Western Civilization. There are the rational elements left in modern science; and modern science

itself is an enormous achievement. There is the legacy of the Industrial Revolution. There are the remnants of America's individualistic political heritage, and of nineteenth-century Romantic art. These treasures exist side by side with all the lunacies.

How are we to understand such an incredible mixture?

For a symbol of this mixture (one that is no more eloquent than ten thousand others you find today), what I myself think of is a New York City skyscraper—with everything that implies—that has the thirteenth story labeled fourteen because thirteen is an unlucky number. This symbolizes the mixture of modern technology with ancient (in this case numerological) mysticism.

Now, why? Better periods have existed in the past. Why did these not last? Where should we look for an explanation of it all? The answer is: in the history of philosophy.

Consider an analogy. Suppose that you are a psychotherapist and you have a patient, an individual of mixed premises—partly rational, partly irrational. As a result he is tortured, stumbling, groping; and you want to understand him. The first thing you would have to do is to understand the cause of his troubles. What are his bad premises? Why does he hold them? How did he come to hold them? And then you would have to guide him to uproot his bad premises and substitute correct ones in their stead. To do this, the crucial thing would be to probe the patient's past. You need to understand the crucial events in his past life and the conclusions he drew from them. You have to see how and why, across the course of his development, he was led to form and accept certain errors, and then to build upon them, thereby compounding his original problems, progressively stifling his better premises, making himself more and more twisted, confused, helpless. In a word, you would have to reconstruct, from childhood on, the main points of the man's intellectual development.

This patient is analogous to an entire culture. The stand-in for the neurotic of mixed premises is Western Civilization, the world

you live in. The stand-in for the psychologist is each one of you. You live in this culture, your lives and futures depend in thousands of ways on its future. If you pursue values in this world, you have a responsibility to your own lives to correct the course of the world, to put it on the right track again. In a world of such mixed premises as ours, to fight for your values you must regard yourself as the psychotherapist of an entire culture.

And just as an individual develops across time, so, even more so, does an entire civilization. The errors of today are built on the errors of the last century—and they in turn on those of the previous century, and so on back to the childhood of the Western world, which is Ancient Greece. To understand what exactly are the root errors of today's world, why and how these errors developed, how they clashed with and are progressively submerging its good premises, and therefore to understand what to do to cure the patient, you have to reconstruct the intellectual history of the Western world.

I will give you now just one example. Consider the phenomenon I alluded to earlier, of progressive education. How would you explain its existence except by reference to John Dewey? But Dewey simply applied to education the principles of William James. And James merely made an obvious deduction from Hegel. And Hegel is a minor variant on Kant. And Kant was trying to answer Hume, whose philosophy was the consistent final consequence of the trend inaugurated by Descartes and Locke, who were just reformulating in a somewhat more secular way the principles of Augustine, who was just reformulating in a somewhat more religious way the principles of Plato, who was trying to answer the dilemma posed by Heraclitus and Parmenides, who took off from four sentences of Thales—the four sentences with which we will begin tonight.

The history of philosophy is like a philosophical psychotherapist's biographical report on a civilization. To understand, and thereby to change, the nature and present path of the

civilization is the first and primary purpose of any course on the history of philosophy.

There is also a second purpose. The history of philosophy, unlike the history of science, is not of merely historical interest; it is not a dead subject. The only issues that a history of philosophy properly deals with are living issues: the perennial, fundamental issues of philosophy. And over the course of a proper history of philosophy are presented all the main positions on all the main questions that have ever been formulated in Western philosophy. Thus, the history of philosophy is valuable, even apart from the goal of changing the culture, as a thorough introduction to the subject of philosophy.

And I will present to you not only the conclusions of the various philosophers, but also the arguments they offer in favor of these conclusions. Almost all of the philosophic errors undermining the world today originally were, and still are, advanced by their supporters with an array of arguments purporting to prove the viewpoint in question. These viewpoints could not have acquired the power they possess over people's minds if they had not taken this form. The apparently supporting arguments are what give the errors their appearance of plausibility and rationality.

Therefore, if you are to fight the errors, you have to know clearly the main arguments advanced for them. In effect, you must hear the devil's case presented as strongly as that case permits. Even though the case may not be very strong, you still must be sure you know on each issue what is true, and what is wrong with the arguments advanced for the erroneous view. If you don't know this, then you are not in a position to fight the errors. This is why I will present as strongly as I can the arguments by which supporters defend the various views, particularly those arguments which are still widely accepted today.

At the appropriate point, I also will present to you the criticism which Objectivism would make of each important position

with which it disagrees. Primarily, I will deliver these criticisms either in the lectures on Aristotle, who took care of a great many errors, or in the last week of the course. The final lecture will cover the Objectivist answers, and will take care of everything that has not been covered up to that time.

My goal for the course as a whole, therefore, is to give you an increased understanding of the causes of today's world, together with a philosophic arsenal to help you combat successfully what needs combatting and defend what needs defending.

## **2. Definition of Philosophy**

Since this is a history of philosophy, it is appropriate very briefly to tell you what philosophy consists of. The word “philosophy” comes from two Greek words, “philein” meaning to love and “sophia” meaning wisdom; so etymologically it means the love of wisdom. And at the very beginning, philosophy was the subject you studied if you studied anything—there was no other subject. Anyone who wanted to acquire knowledge was by that fact a lover of wisdom, a philosopher. This is why the ancient philosophers had views on things that we would not now regard as philosophy, but as science, such as physics, mathematics, and biology. But as each of these disciplines progressed and acquired a certain stock of information, it split off and set up shop on its own. Mathematics was the first to do so, and, many hundreds of years later, physics, chemistry, and so on.

What, then, is philosophy as we use the term today? Essentially, it consists of five main divisions. One is metaphysics: the branch of philosophy that studies the nature of the universe as a whole. Metaphysics embraces two types of question. The first type is: What are the main ingredients of the universe? Is there another dimension, or only this one? Is there only matter or is there also mind? Or is there *only* mind, or what? And the second type of question under metaphysics is: Are there any laws which are true of everything in the universe, of everything which