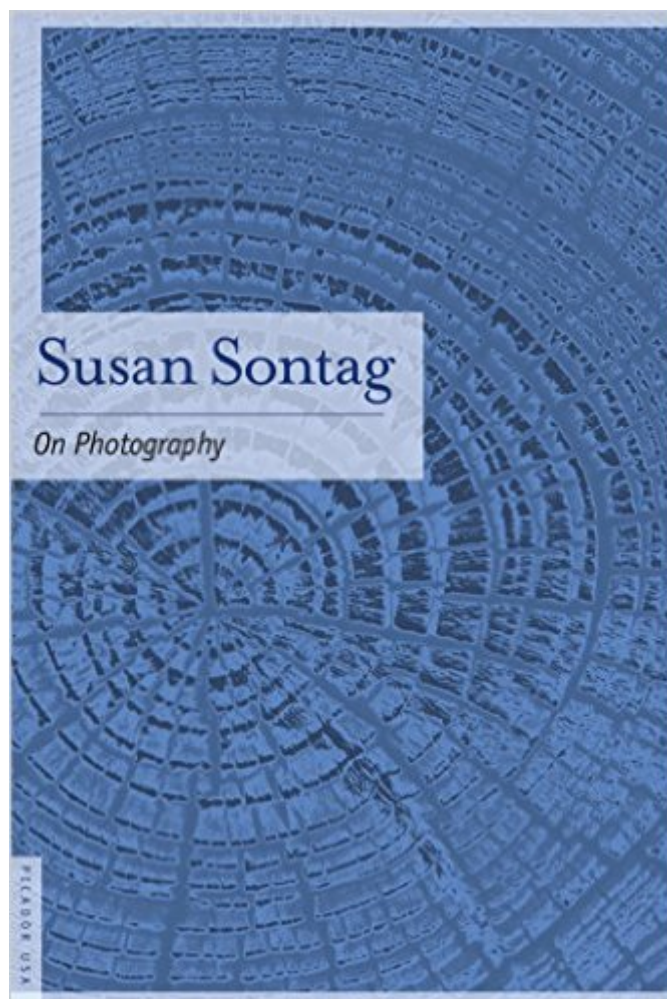


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# On Photography



## Synopsis

Winner of the National Book Critics' Circle Award for Criticism. One of the most highly regarded books of its kind, *On Photography* first appeared in 1977 and is described by its author as "a progress of essays about the meaning and career of photographs." It begins with the famous "In Plato's Cave" essay, then offers five other prose meditations on this topic, and concludes with a fascinating and far-reaching "Brief Anthology of Quotations."

## Book Information

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Average Customer Review: 3.8 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (126 customer reviews)

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## Customer Reviews

This is a quote from the book that I would consider its thesis statement: 'Theories that diseases are caused by mental states and can be cured by will power are always an index of how much is not understood about a disease. Moreover, there is a peculiarly modern predilection for psychological explanations of disease...Psychologizing seems to provide control...over which people have no control. Psychological understanding undermines the 'reality' of a disease.' Sontag traces, historically, the ways different diseases and the people who contracted them have been viewed. She spends time discussing tuberculars--waif-like, pale, romantic--and cancer patients--repressed, the 'cancer personality,' shame--then goes on to debunk these notions by stating that once the cause, cure, inoculation is found, the 'myth' or popular psychology of the disease no longer holds. In this edition, in the final chapter about AIDS and its metaphors Sontag writes that she'd written the first part of the book (all but the AIDS chapter) while a cancer patient and in response to reactions she saw in fellow patients. She saw guilt and shame; and she saw these as impediments to people's treatments. For she knew she had an illness and she set about to cure it medically, in the

best possible way, while others passively accepted the 'metaphor' handed to them and, thus, did less to help themselves best. She felt frustrated or saddened by their psychologizing and self-blame and wished to write to others that their physical illness is a physical illness and the best route to recovery is to think only of how to find the best medical treatment.

Photography, probably more than any other medium, is emblematic of the nature of modern Western society. Photographs are concerned chiefly with appearances, they are deceptively nuanced but essentially narrow, yet somehow they find great breadth in their mechanization and ubiquity. And, like our society, they tend towards an ultimate reduction of the dimensionality of time. Through photographs the past blends into the present, flattening into an omni-present "now" in which history loses its philosophical weight as it increases in familiarity. In a sense photographs are the ultimate invention of a humanist-capitalist society: they provide the commodification of memory itself! And like the society which originated them, they provide equal portions of help and harm, of truth and of fiction; they have undeniable value, but they also result in a certain loss of innocence, and of deeper values. The six essays in this book (all of which were originally published in the New York Times Review of Books) provide a critical evaluation of these themes. Ms. Sontag is concerned with what she sees as the cheapening of experience that the proliferation of photographs in our society has caused. She argues that photography has enshrined a superficiality of experience and contributed to the overvaluation of appearances to a point where image has (subconsciously) replaced reality as reality. In many ways this shift in our modes of cultural perception is shattering; it is also completely inevitable and irreversible. As an example: who after seeing Ansel Adams's stunning photographs of Yosemite could help feeling slightly underwhelmed when experiencing the real thing?

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