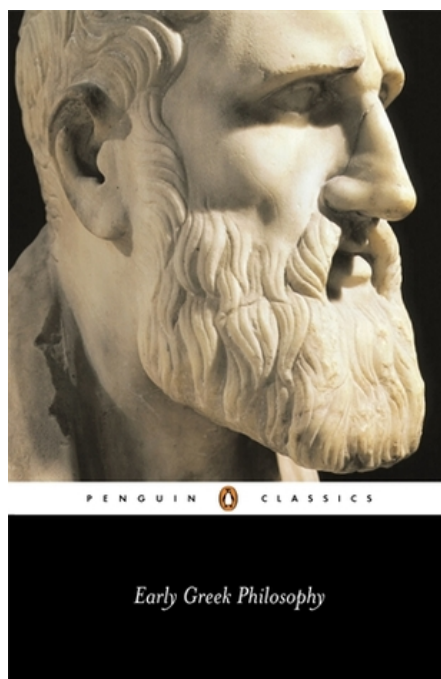




Early Greek Philosophy

Jonathan Barnes (Translator)

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This anthology presents the early sages of Western philosophy and science who paved the way for Plato and Aristotle and their successors. Democritus's atomic theory of matter, Zeno's dazzling "proofs" that motion is impossible, Pythagorean insights into mathematics, Heraclitus's haunting and enigmatic epigrams-all form part of a revolution in human thought that relied on reasoning, forged the first scientific vocabulary, and laid the foundations of Western philosophy. Jonathan Barnes has painstakingly brought together the surviving Presocratic fragments in their original contexts, utilizing the latest research and a newly discovered major papyrus of Empedocles.

Early Greek Philosophy Details

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From Reader Review Early Greek Philosophy for online ebook

Martti says

What exactly is cosmos, the universe of all things, everything, the whole world? Did the universe have a beginning? If so, how did it begin? Why does it move and develop? What are its basic constituents? What is rain, wind, thunder, minerals, plants, animals, and human life?

These profound questions are the subjects of this excellent book. The questions were first asked and answered by early Greek philosophers. The timeline of the book starts at 585 BC when the first Greek philosopher, Thales of Miletus, predicted an eclipse of the sun, and ends around 400 BC when the period of Plato and Aristotle and the famous Greek philosophical schools began.

The author Jonathan Barnes, Professor of Ancient Philosophy in Oxford University and in the University of Geneva, is undeniably an expert in the Greek philosophy. In 300 pages, Barnes presents ideas of famous pre-Socratic philosophers like Thales, Parmenides, Heraclitus, Leucippus, and Democritus.

It is strange that none of the earliest philosophers were Athenians. Philosophy bloomed first in the eastern shores of the Aegean. It was at Miletus in current Turkey where the Greek philosophy was born. Miletus was a busy commercial trading place with connections to Greek, Black Sea, Egypt, Italy, Persia, and Babylonia. Barnes does not claim that the Presocratics began something entirely novel but he concludes that Thales and his associates were men of genius. They were the forerunners of Aristotle and through him the forerunners of modern science and philosophy. The Presocratics invented the very idea of science and philosophy. They were champions of reason and rationality. They offered reasons for their opinions and they gave arguments for their views. They allowed gods but they removed some of the functions from the gods. Thunder was explained scientifically - it was no longer a noise from Zeus. Iris, the goddess of rainbow, was nothing but a multicoloured cloud.

Of all the works of the Presocratics, no original writings have survived for us to read. Still e.g. Democritus was a prolific writer and apparently wrote some 50 books. Some of the works endured at least a thousand years: the scholar Simplicius in the sixth century AD could still consult some original Presocratic texts. What we have are some reports, references and quotations made by later scholars.

The book contains English translations of all the surviving philosophical fragments of the Presocratic thinkers. I found the structure of the book excellent. For readers not deeply familiar with early philosophical issues the 27 pages of the introduction are illuminative. The introduction is followed by a 14-page synopsis which briefly summarizes the key ideas of each philosopher. The remaining pages devote one chapter for each of the 20 philosophers of the book.

To me the main motivation to read the book was to become more familiar with the thinking of Leucippus and Democritus. These two philosophers, the Atomists, presented the theory of atoms which still, after 2500 years, is surprisingly valid in the science of our days. They argued that the universe consists of indivisible atoms which are small and solid. They have size and shape and hardness, but they lack secondary qualities (colour, smell, taste, etc). The atoms exist for ever and are unchangeable. Atomic movements create the world: colliding atoms can stick together, hooks in an atom lock with the eyes of another atom. When atoms collide or are entangled, the aggregates appear as water or fire or plants or men. Everything happens by a mechanical chance; but given infinite space and infinite time, it is only to be expected that the complex structures of the world will somewhere and sometime be formed. It is truly amazing how Leucippus and Democritus could have such profound ideas 2500 years ago, almost without any instruments and without previous works, just by observing the nature and thinking! To me this can well be compared with the

achievements of other giants of the science like Isaac Newton or Albert Einstein. It is a great loss that no original writings of Leucippus and Democritus have survived. Luckily we have quotations from their writings saved by later scholars, e.g. the following famous maxims:

- By convention hot, by convention cold: in reality atoms and void.
- In reality we know nothing - for truth is in the depths.
- The world is change: life is opinion.
- I would rather discover a single causal explanation than become king of the Persians.

I quickly found that 20 pages/day was a suitable amount when trying to assimilate the text. Thank you for writing this excellent book, Jonathan Barnes!

David Withun says

Barnes, the editor and translator, offers an insightful and engaging introduction as well as commentary (though, I should note, this is limited enough not to be distracting) throughout the book. It is what it promised to be: an assemblage of the surviving fragments from the writings of the Presocratic Greek philosophers, filled with wit, wisdom, and more than a little quackery. I recommend this book for anyone interested in the history of philosophy, ancient Greece, and/or the pursuit of wisdom.

Lone Wong says

**"What can be said and be thought of must be; for it can be, and nothing cannot." -
Parmenides**

I've always admired Plato, Aristotle and many other great thinkers for what their thoughts and philosophy contribute and lay the foundation of human knowledge and philosophy for the modern world. But obviously, they build their thoughts and philosophy from the Pre-Socratics Thinkers: Thales, Anaximander, Pythagoras, Xenophanes, Heraclitus, Zeno, Parmenides, Empedocles and etc. As Aristotle saw it, the Presocratics form a coherent group of thought: it was they who began philosophy, they who prepared the way for Plato and for the philosophical Schools of the following generations.

I personally think this is by far the best anthology to introduce the early Sages of Western philosophy. These Greeks were the cornerstone of the scientific inquiry in western Europe. These are the Pre-Socratic philosophers or so-called Natural Philosopher which regarded primarily as "physicists". Ethical and logical matters did indeed exercise some of them, but their primary concerns were physics. Presocratics as the first investigators of matters which became the special objects of astronomy, physics, chemistry, zoology, botany, psychology and so on, all these we might just count as 'science' in the modern term. For all the general goal of the early philosophers was, to tell the truth about nature: to describe, to organize, and to explain the universe and its contents with reason, logic, and observation approach which disregard their contemporary superstition of the Mythology.

It is fascinating and intriguing just by reading the ancient texts of early thinkers. In some degree, we can be able to grasp some truth of their theories which how they perceive the cosmo with only their observations and reflections. Nonetheless, we can assume that the early thinkers attempt to look at nature with logic and a

systematic approach to form a unified theory to explain the world – the desire to explain as much as possible in terms of as little as possible. I mean their emphasis on the use of reason, on rationality, on logic and inference to provide a sound philosophical argument.

At last, let us not be judgemental towards the limitation of the early thinkers' postulation. Rather, we should read the text of the ancient wisdom with intriguing delights, find pleasure in contemplating their efforts to explain the nature with emphasis on rationality. As the author puts it this way: *"They appeal to the intellectual imagination, and they excite readers to construct for themselves some picture of the whole from which they came.....The sketches are not substitutes for the texts in the main chapters, nor do they claim to convey definitive interpretations. Rather, they intended to provide a moderately intelligible framework within which the texts may first be read. They are fixed ropes on a difficult rock face, placed there for the inexperienced climber. Use them once or twice and then climb free. Read them, and forget them."*

lavinia says

in college I had to read guthrie's origins of greek philosophy for one of my classes. it was one of those situations when i had to read 400 pages worth of ancient philosophy in 2 days while also learning about transistors and yucky physics stuff for my main degree. not fun.

since then, i didn't forget *everything*, but i still wanted to revisit some of these early thinkers that amazed me so much back then. i found them just as mesmerizing today, 8 years after i first studied them.

this book in particular is a solid read before going into plato again, but first i think i'll revisit sophists more in depth, i haven't read too much about them and they're somewhat less famous than the earlier thales/anaximander/parmenides/pythagoras

Thomas says

Really great read and introduction to the Pre-Socratic philosophers. I wouldn't describe this book as a pleasure read. It takes some work to get through as it's laying the foundation for Western philosophy. I supplemented my readings of various chapters on the key philosophers with online lectures and podcasts. That enabled me to have a rough idea of what was to come in the book, and made it interesting when the author's translation of a particular phrase differed from the podcast. The key here to this book is Barnes' thorough explanation of how we know what we know of each of these philosophers. None of their actual texts survive, and we only know of their writings from snippets from other ancient philosophers who had access to their original texts. I found all that side info to almost be as fascinating as the actual philosophical fragments.

Aaron says

I read this book in a class on Early Greek Philosophy, and this book was hard to digest at the time. This book is an excellent reference for philosophy students and maybe classics scholars, but not so much for the general public. This book is focused on the Pre-Socratics (philosophers before Socrates) and therefore does not contain anything by Socrates, Plato or Aristotle. However, I think they added in some Greek philosophers that came after Socrates but were outside his teaching and influence.

Barnes has done his work compiling and editing (and translating?) these texts. He takes care to show his work, noting every questionable, contested, missing, or reconstructed piece of the text. Commendable for scholarly work; tedious for the general public. There's always a trade off in deciding what to preserve and what to gloss over, and Barnes takes preservation to the extreme. Decent book for introductory course on philosophy, probably very good for graduate students, bad starter for the general public. For an introduction to Western Philosophy, try *Sophie's World*.

Erick says

Quite a great introduction to the earliest strains of Greek philosophy. One has to keep in mind that these are fragments of larger works and that it is somewhat conjectural as to how some of these fragments fit together in the works from which they were culled and quoted by other (often later) writers. The source reliance on Laertius and Simplicius is rather pronounced as well.

There are certainly common themes that run through the writers treated here. You have, of course, the early philosophers' thoughts on the nature of the cosmos and the primacy of the elements, i.e. earth, air (and/or ether), fire and water. Often one writer positing the primacy of one of these elements over the others.

Obviously, "elements" here simply means basic cosmic constituents and does not denote the elements that make up the periodic table -except maybe in a more loose sense. Also common is the speculation on pre-creation states, often likened to a chaos and/or a void where all qualities and substances existed in a non-distinctive unintelligible conglomeration. Rather interesting is the debates on dichotomies that often show up here: infinitude/finitude, limitedness/unlimitedness, uniformity/multiformity, unity/multiplicity, changeableness/unchangeableness, intelligibleness/unintelligibleness etc. Dichotomies are posited and discussed for qualities as well: dryness/moistness, lightness/darkness, bitterness/sweetness, hardness/softness, coldness/hotness etc. There are also some more idiosyncratic notions that crop up with the Pythagoreans and the Atomists. Of course, the preeminence of mind (nous/logos) is often posited and discussed as well.

I had already taken note of Heraclitus and Anaxagoras prior to reading this from previous research; and, once again, these writers' ideas I find rather fascinating. I would also add Empedocles to that list as well after reading this. I must say that I unapologetically read the first chapters of Genesis in a way that is reminiscent of Anaxagoras' thought. Reading the creation account in Genesis in the banal and trivializing literalist fashion that fundamentalists do has always seemed rather silly to me.

This was a great work to get me in the mood to start rereading Plato again. I do recommend it as an introduction to Greek philosophy in general. One should also keep in mind the provisos I listed above though.

Richard Newton says

Here is the situation - there were a whole lot of pre-socratic philosophers and we only have fragments of their writings. In some cases, we don't have any of the originals, only people commenting on the originals or even people commenting on others' comments on the originals - and many of those commentaries are a couple of thousand years old. The texts were in ancient Greek, and using a style and references that will be difficult to understand even with the best translator. The result is subject matter that is open to huge variations in interpretation and is never going to provide an easy read. This is not a book for the feint hearted, but given the contents I don't see how it can ever be a straightforward read without simplifying the material to the point at which it ceases to reflect the original thinkers' intentions. There are some gems here, but there is also a lot which is simply impenetrable.

Barnes makes a very valiant attempt to present the material. There are other books if you want interpretations and commentary (including one by Barnes) - this book never sets out to provide that. It is primarily a reference source and as such, it is actually pretty good. What difficulties there are, are largely a result of the original materials.

Glenn Russell says

The early Greek philosophers, thinkers like Thales, Anaximander, Pythagoras, Parmenides, Zeno, Empedocles, Leucippus, are foundational for the Western intellectual tradition. I couldn't imagine a better introductory book than this one on the subject. Below are a few quotes from Jonathan Barnes's excellent 40 page introduction along with my brief comments:

"First and most simply, the Presocratics invented the very idea of science and philosophy. They hit upon that special way of looking at the world which is the scientific and rational way. They saw the world as something ordered and intelligible, its history following an explicable course and its different parts arranged in a comprehensible system. The world was not a random collection of bits, its history was not an arbitrary jumble of events." ----- This is central to their spirit of inquiry, an approach compatible with a modern physicist or chemist.

"Nor was the world a series of events determined by the will or the caprice of the gods. The Presocratics were not atheists: they allowed the god into their brave new world, and some of them attempted to produce an improved and rationalized theology in place of the anthropomorphic divinities of the Olympian pantheon. But their theology had little to do with religion, and they removed most of the traditional functions of the gods. Their thunder was no longer the growling of a minatory Zeus." ----- Again, the Presocratics have kindred spirits in the science departments at modern universities.

Jonathan Barnes goes on to write how the Presocratics explained the world in ways that were systematic and economical, that is, these early philosophers wanted to "explain as much as possible in terms of as little as possible." Some of their key concepts were order (kosmos), nature (physis), origins (arche), and reason (logos). ----- These Greek words are supercharged with meaning. I use one English word for simplicity sake. How supercharged? The author does a fine job elaborating.

The actual words of the Presocratics have come down to us as fragments. Here are several of my favorites:

Xenophanes

"But if cows and horses or lions had hands and drew with their hands or made the things men make, then horses would draw the forms of gods like horses, cows like cows, and each would make their bodies similar in shape to their own."

Heraclitus

"The uncomprehending, when they hear, are like the deaf. To them applies the saying: though present they are absent."

Democritus

"To a wise man the whole earth is accessible; for the country of a great soul is the whole world."

"The desire for more destroys what is present – like Aesop's dog."

“One should tell the truth, not speak at length.”

Michael Nash says

I feel like I'm not really expert enough to rate this book. Obviously, one can't really downgrade the content (this book sucked because Heraclitus was WRONG when he said that the world was made of fire). I found that my reaction to it was the same as my reaction to most non-historical ancient texts; some of it was brilliant, some of it was a fascinating look at where our ideas came from, but most of it was deadly boring. The only thing you can really comment on then, is translation, selection of texts, and explanatory notes, none of which I know enough about to really criticize, so I am going to assume that Jonathan Barnes did an excellent job with all of it. I will say that I thought his italicized explanations were lucid and the translation flowed well.

Jacob Aitken says

This book's shortcomings aren't really its fault. The presocratics weren't systematic thinkers, and even if they were none of their writings survive intact. The editor Jonathan Barnes does a fine job of putting them together, but even he admits that many of the arrangements are arbitrary.

1.

Emerging consensus on the infinite. The "infinite" implies "boundary markers" (216).

2.

If God is infinite, and infinity transcends boundaries, can he even be named and spoken? Did Greek Philosophy lead us to this point?

3.

Another consensus (rightly) is that the gods were silly, but the place the gods held was not abandoned. The concept of "number" took its place; "different angles were assigned to different gods" (Philolaus, quoted by Proclus, 219). This became the realm of "forms" with Plato. With Anchoretic Christianity the place of the forms were transformed to the realm of saints and angels (per Tillich).

3.1

St Paul said we are no longer under the elemental spirits of the age (Galatians 3-4).

4.

For better or worse "ousia/physis/essence" usually connoted materiality. It was the stuff of the universe and the universe was usually considered eternal. The editor doesn't draw this out but this explains some of the problems in the early church on Christology. They weren't simply sinful heretics by refusing to say that the Son was the same ousia of the Father. They understand ousia to be material, which the Father was not.

5.

Is the axiom "like is produced by like" (Democritus) correlative to the chain of being: as above, so below?

6.

What's the difference between this and neopaganism?

7.

Democritus says it's stupid to want children (280) and sex is irrational. Compare that with the Old Testament. Maybe there is a difference between Hebrew and Greek thought.

Leslie Williamson says

I believe book was my introduction to early Greek Philosophy - the first text book I read in my first year Philosophy.

Margaret says

A great introduction to presocratic philosophy. 100% Enlightened.

John says

A good introduction to early scientific/philosophic ideas. Empedocles' theory of four basic "stuffs" being effected by Love and Strife was interesting and the most enjoyable to read for me. Diogenes' moral maxims were also interesting and occasionally funny, especially his comments on why not to have children, one of which is "if you produce a child yourself there are many dangers - for you must make do with the one you get."

I see this book as more a history of the evolution of thought than a book leading to philosophical insight. I do wish there was more commentary on the philosophers' writing fragments.

And honestly the introduction was quite interesting, especially when Barnes explains the difficulties in translating and trying to determine a philosopher's intent from a ten word fragment writing thousands of years ago.

Theresa Leone Davidson says

Barnes, a British professor of ancient philosophy, writes about the pre-Socratics, men like Democritus, Heraclitus, Anaxagoras, and Parmenides, who led the way to ideas of philosophy espoused by more famous names, like Socrates. Reading this in a class, with a professor like Barnes, or a professor of ancient Greece, would have been helpful, as I was left with many unanswered questions. Nevertheless, for anyone interested in philosophy, I would recommend.
