

Early Greek Philosophy: An Introduction

According to the tradition, philosophy began in two locations: in Ionia and in Italy. Thales of Miletus and Pythagoras of Samos independently began what is presently called philosophy. These early Greek philosophers are often referred to as the “pre-Socratic” philosophers. This designation is misleading, and it implies that the tradition is correct in its assessment of the development and origin of philosophy. There are very good reasons to be suspicious of this assessment that I intend to illustrate below.

If we follow the tradition and its assessment of these “pre-Socratic” philosophers, we would feel justified that none of their works have survived. The only concern, so it would appear, of these “pre-Socratic” philosophers was Cosmology or inquiries into nature. Each of these “pre-Socratic” philosophers self-consciously was aware that he was doing philosophy and founded a school in which further inquiry centered around the school’s doctrines would be propounded.

In fact, most of the early Greek philosophers wrote little. The survival of what they did write or thought is fragmentary, often mediated not by their own words but by the testimony of Aristotle or Theophrastus or other much later authors. These remains are exceptionally precious not only because of their intrinsic quality but also for what they reveal concerning the earliest history of western philosophy. The fascination of the material, notwithstanding or even because of its density and lacunar transmission, grips everyone who encounters it. Many of these thinkers are so challenging that the small quantity of their surviving works is no impediment to treating each one of them to a book length treatment. A great example of this is Charles Kahn’s *Anaximander and the Origin of the Greek Cosmology*. Kahn’s work attempts to present systematically all that we can know of Anaximander, whose work survives as a single sentence.

Let’s look at the materials we are dealing with. First, we are dealing with an era marked by thinkers who were profoundly innovative and experimental. The younger of them did not ignore their predecessors, and within the sixth and fifth centuries BCE a number of distinct movements developed which are distinguished geographically - the early Ionian cosmologists, the Pythagoreans, the Eleatics, the Atomists, and the Sophists. In spite of the tradition, this is not a period of schools in the literal sense of Plato’s Academy or Aristotle’s Lyceum, with a formal head, a curriculum, and an ongoing succession. Many of these thinkers may or may not have had any personal contact with other thinkers. If the tradition informs us that one thinker is the followers of another, it may mean nothing more than a later thinker took up the arguments of another earlier thinker, and propounded them into a system. A good example of this is a Melissus of Samos. He had, probably, no contact with Parmenides, but set out to systematize Parmenides’ thought.

Second, even allowing for the numerous gaps in our knowledge, we can observe significant differences among the methodologies and interests of these early Greek philosophers. This is particularly evident in the case of Pythagoras, the only one of them whose name, albeit years after his death, came to stand for a determinate movement. Pythagoras taught a way of life which included purificatory practices and their supreme importance for the destiny of the human soul after death. His contributions to philosophy and science, as we understand these things

today, are harder to discern, especially by comparison with such figures as Democritus or Anaxagoras. Yet it would be a grave mistake to excise Pythagoras from the main stream of early Greek philosophy. Criticism of conventional religious rituals, such as blood sacrifices, and the promise that a true understanding of the world will transform a person's life, are emphatically stated also by Heraclitus and Empedocles. Some early Greek philosophers have little or no attested interest in psychology, epistemology, ethics, and theology; others incorporate contributions to these subsequently demarcated fields in their work.

Third, most of these thinkers, whose fluidity and diversity are a central part of early Greek philosophy, did not identify himself, with the sole exception of Pythagoras - who, in fact, coined the word "philosophy" - as a philosopher or called his project "philosophy". The point here is not that we should not call them philosophers, but that we should beware of attributing to them anachronistic conceptions of the scope of philosophy and its subdivisions into fields of logic, metaphysics, and ethics. Even Plato, who was the first Greek thinker to theorize explicitly about the nature of philosophy, is innocent of this kind of demarcation.

So, we might wonder "why study them at all?" I can identify at least three important reasons for looking into these early Greek philosophers. First, these early Greek thinkers made pioneering contributions not only to the understanding of the world in general but also to philosophical topics that were later described more specifically. These concerns would be taken up later in the fourth and fifth centuries BCE to develop into what we would understand as philosophy. Without these early investigations, it could be arguably said, there would not have been a Plato or an Aristotle with all of the importance we place on those names. In essence, these early Greek thinkers enabled the type of speculative thinking that forms the very basis of what we understand science to be.

Second, these thinkers attempted to "give an account of all things", which we should take as a quasi-technical expression. The project is not to talk about or explain literally everything, but rather to give a universalist account, to show the "all" or the universe is like, to take everything - the world as a whole - as a subject of inquiry. In examining the interests of these early Greek thinkers, a commentator cannot help but to project certain constraints on these materials in order to make sense of them. By taking the world as a whole as a subject of inquiry, this generated certain needed responses from any of these thinkers. For example: what is the nature of the world? Is it composed of one substance or many? Is it in the nature of things to remain the same or to constantly change? What accounts for the changes perceived in objects? How does this relate to the fundamental nature of the world? What is man's role in relation to the world? What is the nature of human knowledge? Is knowledge of the essence of the world or is knowledge depended on how things are perceived by us? Finally, given the nature of the world, and the nature of human knowledge, what, if anything, are we supposed to do with it? Does this knowledge have any bearing on how we act?

I would suggest that these early Greek thinkers, and their respective concerns, can be categorized by the above list of questions. Although the above list of questions brings some figures into the fold, while excluding others (Herodotus and Thucydides are great examples), gives us an anchor point and a path through this material. These questions do pose a serious challenge to the tradition, while embracing its fundamental interest in origins and in explaining what philosophy is. These questions do not embrace the traditional designation of "pre-Socratic" philosophy, but what might be called pre-Platonic or pre-Aristotelean philosophy. Designations have a purpose, but we should not get too attached to any of them. We might even be inclined to

say pre-Hellenistic philosophy to be most accurate. This would include the truly classical thinkers, such as Plato, Aristotle, and to some extent Epicurus, although clearly he is in the Hellenistic camp. What the designation of “pre-Hellenistic” philosophy would allow us to avoid is calling Democritus, say, a “pre-Socratic” philosopher, when in fact he is a contemporary of Socrates. If Democritus is a “pre-Socratic” philosopher, it is only by one year that he is in any meaningful sense of the term “before Socrates”, in that Democritus was born one year before Socrates. If Democritus is a “pre-Socratic” philosopher, it is only by one year that he is in any meaningful sense of the term “before Socrates”, in that Democritus was born one year before Socrates. What these questions do challenge is the overall importance of Socrates, and the direct lineage of Socrates - Plato - Aristotle, as the anchor thread of what PHILOSOPHY is. These questions open up the playing field, so to speak, and recognize that there was more than one Socratic movement (besides that of Plato’s) and that Plato takes his rightful central place in our conception of what philosophy ought to be doing. This does not take away from other thinkers like, say, Democritus or Aristotle, but focuses our attention that the single most important philosopher of antiquity is Plato. We have everything that Plato wrote, and more than that. This cannot be said of any other ancient philosopher, including Aristotle. As you will see, over the course of this semester, this not only anchors our understanding of the nature of inquiry, but also places Plato in a rather obscure place. In any event, the period of early Greek philosophy comes to an end with the formation of the Hellenistic schools in the fourth century, and the “handbookization” of philosophy during the Imperial times. It was during the Imperial phase of philosophy that the canonization of Plato began, and continues to the present day.

What I do hope you gather from this initial lecture is not only the importance of these early Greek thinkers, but also why we ought to be interested in them at all. Perhaps with the ongoing archeological work being done throughout the Middle East and the Mediterranean world, more documents will be forthcoming. In their absence, the best we can hope for is some rudimentary understanding of these doctrines and their later importance to the development of philosophy.