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The scope of early Greek philosophy p 1-21

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1 The scope of early Greek philosophy

Unlike other books in this series, the present volume is not a “companion” to a single philosopher but to the set of thinkers who collectively formed the beginnings of the philosophical tradition of ancient Greece. Most of them wrote little, and the survival of what they wrote or thought is fragmentary, often mediated not by their own words but only by the testimony of Aristotle, Theophrastus, and 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 and science. The fascination of the material, notwithstanding or even because of its density and lacunar transmission, grips everyone who encounters it.¹ Two of our century’s most influential philosophers, Heidegger and Popper, have “gone back” to the earliest Greek philosophers in buttressing their own radically different methodologies and preoccupations.² Many of these thinkers are so challenging that the small quantity of their surviving work is no impediment to treating each of them at book length. Even so, there are reasons beyond our fragmentary sources and conventional practice for presenting these and other early Greek philosophers in a collective volume.

First, we are dealing with an era marked by thinkers who were profoundly innovatory and experimental. The younger of them did not ignore their predecessors, and within the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. (the chronology of our period) a number of distinct movements developed which are distinguishable geographically or dialectically – the early Ionian cosmologists, the Pythagoreans, the Eleatics, the atomists, and the sophists. Yet, 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. Melissus can be called an Eleatic or follower of Parmenides, by virtue of the conclusions for which he argued, but as a Samian admiral he may have had no personal acquaintance with Parmenides, whose place of birth and presumed residence was Elea in southern Italy. Zeno of Elea, who must have known his fellow countryman Parmenides, may have followed him more literally than Melissus did, but Zeno's arguments bear directly, as Parmenides' do not, on the early history of Greek mathematics. Xenophanes, Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Empedocles all trumpet the individuality of their ideas, and explicitly or implicitly criticize other thinkers as well as ordinary people. In order to interpret the work of any early Greek philosopher, reference to the whole period is indispensable.

Secondly, even allowing for the numerous gaps in our knowledge, we can observe significant differences among the methodologies and interests of the 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 today understand these, are harder to discern, especially by comparison with such figures as Zeno or 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 sacrifice, 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.

The fluidity and diversity of early Greek philosophy are a central part of its character and importance. For that reason too, the subject is particularly apt for treatment in a multi-authored volume, not only because of the opportunity this gives for a pooling of expertise, but also as a way of articulating some of the many interpretive approaches to the style and content of early Greek philosophy. In the earlier years of this century, debates raged about its scientific or nonscientific character, its common-sense or counter-intuitive

biases, its theological dimensions, and much else.³ Those debates will never entirely disappear. The material is too complex for that, and in this field, more than in most, every interpreter is bound to project a viewpoint in order to say anything worth saying. That is not to invalidate attempts to describe what the main thinkers have in common, such as “the inquiry into nature.” More on this later in the chapter. For now, it is essential to recognize that, with the possible exception of Pythagoras, none of the figures treated in this book identified himself expressly as a “philosopher” or called his project “philosophy.”⁴ The point is not that we should avoid calling them philosophers, but that we should beware of attributing to them anachronistic conceptions of the scope of philosophy and its subdivision into fields such as logic, metaphysics, and ethics. Even Plato, who was the first Greek thinker to theorise explicitly about the nature of philosophy, is innocent of this kind of demarcation.

Nevertheless, early Greek philosophers made pioneering contributions not only to the understanding of the world in general but also to philosophical topics that were later described more specifically. For ease of exposition and to facilitate a broad grasp of what early Greek philosophy comprised, this book is divided between chapters on particular thinkers and chapters on topics. In the case of the sophists (Chapters 14–15), the topics and the individual thinkers largely coincide because, so far as our record is concerned, the sophists’ most distinctive contribution to early Greek philosophy was their teaching of rhetoric and linguistics, relativism and political theory. Chapters 10–13, on the other hand, are devoted to topics that are quite heterogeneous in the thinkers whose views are discussed there – chapters on rational theology; the beginnings of epistemology; soul, sensation, and thought; and responsibility and causality. The principal heroes of this last topic chapter, by Mario Vegetti, are Hippocratic doctors. It was they, he argues, rather than those we conventionally count as early Greek philosophers, who pioneered rigorous thinking about causes. His chapter also includes the historians Herodotus and Thucydides. Rather than trespassing outside the proper limits of early Greek philosophy, this material is an important indication of their instability. If space were not an issue, this book would have included much more from the rich field of Hippocratic medicine.⁵

A final topic chapter, or rather a coda to the whole book, is provided by Glenn Most in his wide-ranging study of “the poetics of early

Greek philosophy." Three of the early Greek philosophers, Xenophanes, Parmenides, and Empedocles, chose verse rather than the newer medium of prose as the vehicle for expressing their thought; Heraclitus, though he did not compose in any of the formal modes of Greek verse, adopted a rhythmical and epigrammatic style that is uniquely his own. Here we have yet another indication of the fluid character of Greek philosophy in its formative years; for from the second half of the fifth century onward, discursive prose would become the standard medium for writing philosophy, and poetic "truth" would be treated as different in kind from the probative ambitions of philosophy. However, "poetics" is an integral feature of our subject for deeper reasons than the philosopher poets' literary form. Traditional Greek wisdom was virtually identical to the epic poetry of Homer and Hesiod. As the staple of primary education, these great texts, more than any others, influenced and provoked both the style and the content of early Greek philosophy. If innovative thought was to take root, Homer and Hesiod had to be dethroned or at least shifted away from their commanding position, and so we find explicit criticism of them in Xenophanes and Heraclitus. Yet, in numerous ways, as Most so convincingly shows, Homeric and Hesiodic patterns of thought as well as expression are still palpable in early Greek philosophy, not to mention such obvious points of contact as the "divine" inspiration invoked by Parmenides and Empedocles, or the explicit interpretations of poetry essayed by Democritus, Gorgias, and Protagoras.

The topic chapters distinguish this book's account of early Greek philosophy from many standard treatments of the subject.⁶ So too, to some extent, our treatment of individuals. The Milesian trio, Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes, are the main theme of a single study – Chapter 3. We have no chapters solely devoted to Xenophanes or to Diogenes of Apollonia, while Empedocles and Anaxagoras are discussed together in Chapter 8 from the perspective of their responses to Parmenides. Zeno is given a chapter to himself, but Parmenides and Melissus are presented in conjunction. If this procedure looks partial or idiosyncratic, the chapters on topics and the index will provide the reader with many additional perspectives on all the main thinkers. Thus Xenophanes is accorded a good many pages in Chapters 3, 10, 11, and 16. Empedocles, one of the most many-sided thinkers, figures prominently in the topic chapters and

also in Chapter 4, on the Pythagorean tradition. A great advantage of this procedure, or so we believe, is its combination of diachronic history, treating of individuals, with the analysis of salient themes and methodologies to which they collectively contributed.

However, there is more than that to the book's rationale. We start, after this introduction and Chapter 2 on sources, with the beginnings of cosmology at Miletus (Chapter 3). For evidence on this subject, we are almost entirely dependent on the tradition of interpretation initiated by Aristotle and Theophrastus. Whatever we make of that tradition, there is no question that it imports some anachronism and misrepresentation.⁷ In addition, it has helped to promote the view that early Greek philosophers in general were predominantly, if not exclusively, cosmologists, whose chief questions were about the origins and material principles of the world.⁸ Cosmologists, indeed, most of them were if we exempt the sophists. But should the sophists be extruded from the ranks of early Greek philosophers because they did not engage, to any great extent, in cosmology?⁹ Apart from the inappropriateness of answering yes to that question, identifying early Greek philosophy as predominantly cosmology has had the unfortunate effect of making its contributions to epistemology, ethics, and other topics seem ancillary and perfunctory. That misconception is no longer so entrenched, but it has hardly disappeared. Therefore, one of the aims of this book is to show how much these early thinkers contributed not only to cosmology but also to other topics that would become part of the main agenda of philosophy.

TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF EARLY GREEK PHILOSOPHY

Thus far I have refrained from calling the early Greek philosophers by the familiar term Presocratics. The word first became current in English after the German scholar Hermann Diels nearly a hundred years ago used it for the title of his great collection of evidence on early Greek philosophy, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (*The fragments of the Presocratics*).¹⁰ Since then, it has become standard terminology. Those who first encounter the word probably suppose that it refers simply to thinkers who were chronologically prior to Socrates, and that is broadly true for the figures in Diels' first volume, who range from the mythical Orpheus to "the Pythagorean school."

But in Diels' own usage, Presocratic is more than a chronological marker. As his younger collaborator Walther Kranz explained, the second volume of their collection includes "many contemporaries of Socrates, and indeed some who outlived him. Even so the book is a unity" because in it "a philosophy speaks which has not passed through the intellectual schools of Socrates (and Plato) – not just the Presocratic but also the non-Socratic early philosophy."¹¹

This comment is less innocent of assumptions than it may seem to be. What is especially telling is that Kranz puts Plato's name in a parenthesis. In fact, of course, Plato's writings are our principal source for determining Socrates' unwritten philosophy and for distinguishing it from that of his contemporaries, including especially the sophists. Most of what we can learn about the sophists, apart from the surviving work of Gorgias, stems from Plato, and nothing mattered more to Plato than defending Socrates from the widespread belief that he was, to many intents and purposes, a sophist. Plato, then, is far from being an unbiased witness to the distinctiveness of Socrates' philosophy. Certainly, he is the best we have, and unquestionably Socrates, in his interrogative methodology, his search for definitions of moral concepts, his self-examined life, and in a great deal else was a massively original figure. However, Diels and Kranz were writing at a time when scholars supposed that they knew much more about the historical Socrates than many experts are confident of knowing today.

We can be confident that the historical Socrates was much more like his namesake in Plato's *Apology* and *Crito* than the character "Socrates," investigator of nature and sophist, who is travestied in Aristophanes' raucous comedy, *The Clouds*. I am not suggesting that Presocratic is a term that should be totally abandoned; even if that were desirable, it would not be practicable. Given the sources at our disposal and Socrates' remarkable afterlife, it would be irresponsible to treat him simply as one among other thinkers of the fifth century B.C. He must be viewed in association with Plato, and hence he is scarcely discussed in this book (but see Chapters 14–15). Still, that requirement does not license us to regard even Plato's Socrates as a figure so seminal that those he influenced were quite discontinuous with those who missed his impact.

By representing the early Greek philosophers as conceptually or methodologically Presocratic, we have tended to overlook or

marginalise their interest in such topics as I have already mentioned, including ethics, psychology, theology, and epistemology. Because Plato never mentions Democritus, it is easy to forget that Democritus was Socrates' contemporary.¹² Yet, there are striking affinities between Democritus' moral psychology and ideas voiced by Plato's Socrates.¹³ Writers of later antiquity, who credit Socrates with single-handedly originating philosophical ethics, were too keen on identifying "first discoverers." Far from undercutting Socrates' significance, we highlight it when we acknowledge the ethical dimensions of Xenophanes or Heraclitus, or indicate the interests he shared with, and doubtless debated with, the sophists. The Presocratic label is also misleading because of its generality. Vague though it is, it suggests that all the early Greek philosophers are easily identifiable as a group, and chiefly so by their non-Socratic features. In that way, the term conceals the fluidity and diversity I have already emphasized. Presocratic also tends to obscure Plato's dialectical relation to his other predecessors, especially the Pythagoreans, Eleatics, and Heraclitus: a relation that takes on increasing importance in Plato's later dialogues where he replaces Socrates with the Eleatic and Athenian "strangers" and with Timaeus.

Neither in antiquity nor subsequently has unanimity reigned over the scope, boundaries, and subdivisions of early Greek philosophy. Aristotle and Theophrastus, as Jaap Mansfeld explains in the next chapter, were chiefly interested in classifying the opinions of their predecessors on topics such as the number and identity of the world's principles, the soul, and sense perception. All of these fell under the Peripatetic concept of "nature," so they called the proponents of these views inquirers into nature (*physikoi* or *physiologoi*).¹⁴ Sometimes Aristotle comments on their relative chronology, but whether he does so, or who he includes within a given context, depends on his view of their relevance to his topic. In his treatment of "causes," he makes a clear break between Plato and those who preceded him, including Parmenides and the Pythagoreans, and here (but only here) he famously emphasizes Socrates' concentration on ethics to the exclusion of any inquiry into "nature as a whole."¹⁵ In his treatment of "principles" (*Physics* I), Aristotle discusses the early Ionian cosmologists, Heraclitus, Empedocles, Anaxagoras, Parmenides, and Melissus and briefly alludes to Plato. In book I of his work *On the soul*, his discussion of his predecessors is synchronic, independent of any

attempts to define periods of thought, and treats Plato alongside earlier philosophers (as does Theophrastus in his work *On the senses*). Aristotle nowhere calls Protagoras a sophist, and after he has argued against Protagoras' "man measure" doctrine (*Metaph.* IV.5), he likens its rationale to statements by Anaxagoras, Democritus, and others.

Aristotle has an implicit concept of *early* Greek philosophy, but it is more pre-Platonic than pre-Socratic.¹⁶ Subsequent authors of philosophical "successions" and lives, writing in Hellenistic times, tended to draw a line *under* Socrates in order to present everything that came *after* him as a series of Socratic schools specializing in ethics.¹⁷ Yet, Socrates himself could also be presented as the last link in a succession that began with Anaximander.¹⁸ For us these classifications are mainly of antiquarian interest, but they help to show that the boundaries of this history, though they need to be drawn, are inevitably imprecise and partly subjective.

The point is not simply methodological. It also affects what we take as the beginning of early Greek philosophy, and how we interpret its subsequent history. I say history rather than development, because the concept of development, which controls Zeller's Hegelian treatment of Greek philosophy, has also been too dominant.¹⁹ Its biological connotations tend to prejudge the superiority of what comes later to what precedes, and while there undoubtedly are developments in the sense that Democritus' atomism is a response to and (in our modern eyes) a clear advance on all preceding theories concerning the foundations of physical reality, Heraclitus and Parmenides, for instance, deserve scrutiny and provoke thought entirely for their own sake, however we assess them in relation to subsequent philosophy.

As regards the beginning, this book follows the convention, authorized by Aristotle, of making Thales of Miletus the pioneer, and no *individual* claimant with a better title will ever be suggested. Yet Aristotle, to his credit, observes that "one could suspect" that the epic poet Hesiod has adumbrated his own idea of an "efficient cause" (*Metaph.* I.4 984b23). In certain contexts, Aristotle is quite prepared to find philosophical thoughts in figures prior to Thales. And was Thales or Anaximander the first Ionian philosopher? Diogenes Laertius, writing around A.D. 200, classifies Thales as one of the seven wise men (*sophoi*), but he also makes him the teacher of Anaximander, whom he credits with originating Ionian philosophy (I.13).

Then there is the intriguing but obscure figure of Pherecydes, the first, according to some very late reports, to teach the immortality of the soul.²⁰ Suspicion about this is natural when one reads that Pherecydes was the teacher of Pythagoras (D. L. *ibid.*), and Pherecydes too is pushed back by Diogenes into the ranks of “wise men” prior to philosophy. The question of whether to include Hesiod and Pherecydes in the history of early Greek philosophy is usually answered either negatively or by treating them as “forerunners.”²¹ One justification for that procedure will emphasize the difference between the *mythological* cosmogonies of Hesiod and Pherecydes and the early Ionian cosmologists’ reference to observable regularities that do not depend upon the arbitrary will of divinities. The point is well taken, but it will hardly stand as a defining characteristic of early Greek philosophy in general. Neither Parmenides nor Empedocles (nor Plato, for that matter) disavows all use of mythology, and theology is an important element in the thinking of Xenophanes and Heraclitus (see Chapters 10 and 16).

If Thales or Pythagoras or Xenophanes had been isolated figures, to whom their contemporaries and the next generation made no significant and explicit responses, there would be little reason for treating them as the beginnings of philosophy as distinct from the continuation of “wisdom” already represented by the likes of Hesiod and Pherecydes. What particularly distinguishes the former group from the latter is a pair of very significant facts. First, Thales, whether or not he “taught” Anaximander, was plainly perceived as influencing the more ambitious cosmologies of his fellow Milesians, Anaximander and Anaximenes. He left some kind of intellectual legacy which could be drawn upon, improved, and criticized. Second, by around 500 B.C. Heraclitus forcefully differentiates his own thought from the “polymathy” of both Hesiod and three others – Pythagoras, Xenophanes, and Hecataeus (DK 22 B40).

This quartet of names is most revealing. Heraclitus couples the revered poet Hesiod with three recent contenders for “wisdom.” To Pythagoras and Xenophanes he adds the Milesian geographer and chronicler Hecataeus. We could ask for no better evidence than this for a participant’s perspective on Greek philosophy in its formative stage. Heraclitus seeks to distance himself both from ancient authorities (Hesiod) and from a *group* of near contemporary figures. We should assume that he chose this constellation quite deliberately.

Three of them stand for new, would-be authorities, representatives of an enterprise in which he too is engaged, but which he will execute far more effectively. Significantly, however, Heraclitus is so close to the beginnings of the tradition he will help to shape that he attacks Hesiod in the same sentence that pillories Xenophanes, Pythagoras, and Hecataeus.

Competition over wisdom and skill had long been endemic in Greek culture. Poets as well as athletes vied with and were expected to vie with one another. What is new in Heraclitus (and we see it also in Xenophanes) is the subject for competition. Xenophanes, according to the better construal of an ambiguous sentence, describes himself as talking about "all things" (DK 21 B34),²² and Heraclitus, right at the beginning of his book, claims that all things happen in accordance with the account (*logos*) that he gives (DK 22 B1). Within the same context, Heraclitus describes himself as "distinguishing each thing according to its nature" (*physis*). The "inquiry into nature" is an apt description of early Greek philosophy; it was Aristotle's expression, as we have seen, and there is no doubt that some early Greek philosophers, whether or not they used the word, pioneered such connotations of nature as objectivity, the way things are, the basic structure of things, reality as distinct from appearance or convention. Still, to say all this is to jump ahead somewhat. More authentic for grasping what Xenophanes and Heraclitus took themselves to be undertaking may be the formulation, "giving an account of *all things*."

GIVING AN ACCOUNT OF ALL THINGS

We should take this expression in a quasi-technical way. The project is not to talk about or explain literally everything, but rather to give a universalist account, to show what the "all" or the universe is like, to take everything – the world as a whole – as the subject of inquiry.²³ We can now see why Heraclitus chose the four members of his dismissed quartet: Xenophanes probably professed a discussion of all things; Hecataeus of Miletus had made a map of the earth, and he also wrote a work tracing families back to their mythological origins; Hesiod's *Theogony* is universalist in its aim to include the main features of the visible world and also numerous "abstract" things such as love, strife, friendship, and deceit, within the scheme of divine

progenitors and their offspring. As for Pythagoras, even if he did not initiate the mathematics and the musical models of the world, associated with his name, we can presume he was widely regarded as the author of a quite general account of things, especially how human beings, by virtue of their souls, are situated.

It is significant that Heraclitus does not include Thales, Anaximander, or Anaximenes in his hit-list. If his point had been simply to attack all other universalists, these Milesian cosmologists could have been prime candidates. What saved them from criticism here, we may guess, is the *focus* of their accounts on the world's underlying unity, the proposition that Heraclitus himself proclaims to be the essence of wisdom – “All things are one” (DK 22 B50). Hesiod and the younger trio, by contrast, are taken to have obscured this central truth by contaminating their universalist pretensions with a multiplicity of data (polymathy).²⁴

By viewing early Greek philosophy as a project of accounting for and systematizing all things, we get a formulation that incorporates the main figures discussed in this book, and that does justice to their fluidity and variety without collapsing into vagueness. The term “nature” (*physis*), in spite of its generality, inclines us to regard something more restrictive, the physical world and in particular its beginning (because *physis* primarily means “origin” or “growth”), as their single focus. This works pretty well in the case of the Milesian cosmologists, for whom our patchy evidence is largely filtered via the Aristotelian tradition. It is less effective for delineating the early Greek philosophers whose own words we are in a position to read, especially if it inclines us to see them as detached observers and theorists of nature, who do not include the mind and human subject within the scope of their inquiries.²⁵ Yet, right at the beginning of our period at Miletus, we find Anaximander investigating the origin of living beings and the “evolution” of humans.²⁶ In the next generation, Anaximenes used the human soul as a microcosmic model for the way “divine” air encompasses the world.²⁷ Even at Miletus, then, “cosmology” was broadly conceived. When we come to thinkers who are better attested, their universalism and interest in human experience are strikingly evident. This book documents numerous familiar instances, but others, less well known, are highly relevant here.

Anaxagoras studied Homer's ethical content, and his cosmology was used as the basis for giving an allegorical account of the *Iliad*.²⁸

Democritus, of whose voluminous writings we possess pathetically little, anticipates Aristotle in the vast scope of his interests. They included ethics (see Chapter 9), mathematics, music, anthropology, and literary theory, especially on Homer. Both Gorgias and Hippias, according to Plato, were prepared to talk on any subject, and Plato describes Hippias' claim to teach astronomy, mathematics, and philology, to the last of which both Prodicus and Protagoras made salient contributions.²⁹ As a defining mark of early Greek philosophy's scope, "accounting for *all things*" can accommodate the so-called sophists within the tradition. Doubtless Gorgias and Protagoras had nothing to say about objective nature, but that can be explained by their sceptical or relativistic views on truth (see Chapter 14). They certainly were prepared to talk about "all (the) things" they deemed relevant to human utility and understanding, as befits Protagoras' famous slogan: "Man is the measure of *all things*."

This is not to say that little has changed between the interests and methods of the earliest of the early Greek philosophers and those of the latest. Nor is it to question the sophists' innovativeness in their role as paid educators. By the later years of the fifth century, "wisdom" (*sophia*), the common denominator of the words philosophy and sophist, has acquired a more "professional" connotation than it had at the time of Thales – a connotation of acknowledged expertise in understanding and teaching the *general* conditions of the world and human experience. This cultural development would not have been possible without the startlingly bold presumption, evident from the Milesians onward, that attempts to *account for* all things, as distinct from relying on trust and tradition, are humanly possible and desirable. Even Aristophanes supports this interpretation of the scope of early Greek philosophy; for while we may choose to call his parodic Socrates a combination of "natural" scientist and sophist, the character in the comedy itself is a unity.

To sum up. From about 550–500 B.C. in Ionia – at Miletus (the city of Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes), Samos (the birthplace of Pythagoras), Colophon (Xenophanes' native city), and Ephesus (the home of Heraclitus) – what *will* become a quite new intellectual tradition is in the making. The persons in question are highly individualistic. Pythagoras migrates to Croton in southern Italy, and forms a religious community there; Xenophanes includes Italian cities in his travels, and composes in various verse forms; Anaximander writes a

book in the new medium of prose; and Heraclitus expresses himself in highly obscure and epigrammatic sentences. There is no conformity, as yet, about what it is to philosophize, no conception of philosophy as such. However, the youngest of these figures, Heraclitus, is already insistent that he has an account of "all things" that is uniquely correct and vastly better than what the others have to offer.

Long before, Hesiod had presented his *Theogony* in a poetic competition, and he too could have called it an account, or at least a story, about "all things." What is it, apart from Heraclitus' distance from traditional mythology and epic discursiveness, that sets him radically apart from Hesiod? Among many points that could be adduced, five are of prime importance. First, Heraclitus is quite explicit about the kind of account he intends to give: it is to be an account that "explains" and "distinguishes" each thing. Trading on the multiple meanings of the word *logos* (discourse, account, reckoning, measure), he comes as close as the current resources of his language allow, to saying that he will give a "rational" and systematic account of all things. Second, his pronouncements, in spite of their obscurity, show his concern to make his account coherent with our cognitive faculties, both empirically and conceptually. He makes it possible to conduct an argument with him. Third, he formulates this account in a way calculated to "awaken" people from their individual delusions about how all things happen. He has a transformative, one might almost say "salvational," objective. Fourth, he intends not only to tell truths but also to tell them in such a way that those who listen will be required to think and investigate for themselves. He is a teacher who wishes to provoke the minds of his audience. Fifth, as Xenophanes had already done, Heraclitus sets himself apart from merely ethnocentric conventions and received wisdom, but he also adopts a critical distance from Xenophanes and everyone else.

Giving an account of all things that is (1) explanatory and systematic, (2) coherent and argumentative, (3) transformative, (4) educationally provocative, and (5) critical and unconventional – with such a formulation we can encompass the general project of early Greek philosophy without anachronism and with respect for its diversities of emphasis, method, and specific content. Like any generalization, it is too broad to incorporate every particularity; this book, for instance, scarcely deals with the meteorological speculations of some early Greek thinkers. Still, the generalization is

apt for those thinkers whose own words are well attested, especially Xenophanes, Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Empedocles; it fits what we know of Democritus, and to quite an extent, it also fits the sophists. There is nothing original about my first, second, and fifth features, but the third and fourth require some amplification.

Karl Popper wrote of the Presocratics' "simple straightforward rationality."³⁰ His enthusiasm for these thinkers is beguiling, but they actually become far more interesting when we acknowledge that their rationality was neither simple nor straightforward. A prominent French scholar has recently proposed that the entire Graeco-Roman tradition of philosophy should be construed, first and foremost, as practical and "spiritual" in its goals, advocating philosophy as a way of life.³¹ This characterization will strike many people as appropriate only to *some* later ancient philosophies, but it has the great merit of asking us not to impute modernist conceptions of philosophy's complete disinterestedness or "pure" inquiry to classical antiquity. Notice, for instance, how Euripides, a tragedian deeply versed in the intellectual ferment of his era, makes the chorus in one of his lost plays comment on the blessings of "inquiry":³²

Blessed is he who has learned how to engage in inquiry,
with no impulse to harm his countrymen or to pursue
wrongful actions, but perceives the order of immortal and ageless
nature, how it is structured.

In these lines we hear early Greek philosophy praised in contemporary words that capture its holistic ambition, scientific, speculative, ethical, and awe-inspiring.

The leading figures clearly take falsehood to be grievously damaging to those in error, hence the strident tones with which Xenophanes, Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Empedocles berate their unenlightened audience. Not only Pythagoras but also these thinkers have objectives that can be called transformative, and much of Plato's animus against Protagoras stems from his belief that the latter's claims to be able to teach good management of one's own and one's city's affairs cannot stand their ground against Socratic scrutiny. Plato did not invent the notion that a true account of all things will have a beneficial effect on the lives of those willing to attend to it; he inherited this idea from his philosophical predecessors.

Directly related to this is the feature of being educationally provocative. That hallmark of Socrates can also be traced further back. Although Plato persuades us to draw a radical distinction between Socratic discourse and the rhetoric of sophists, Plato's Socrates, like Plato himself, is also a master rhetorician, as any effective educator must be. Truth, in order to be recognized, needs persuasive expression, but if people are also to be encouraged to discover truths for themselves, they need precisely the provocation in which Heraclitus and Parmenides engaged and which Protagoras as well as Socrates probably engaged in too.

These points reinforce the misdirections that the Presocratic label can induce. To quite a large extent, Plato's Socrates fits the characterization of early Greek philosophy I have offered, and Plato himself fits it even better.³³ In his earliest writings, Plato primarily focused on the ethical questions and methodology he took to be Socrates' distinctive legacy, but as his thinking developed, he concentrated increasingly on Heraclitus, Protagoras, the Pythagoreans, and the Eleatics, outlining his own cosmology only in the *Timaeus*, one of his latest works. Like Aristotle, we should sometimes draw a line before Socrates or before Plato, but for some purposes we need to extend the earliest phase to include even Plato himself.

CONCLUSION

With these modifications my version of the salient features of early Greek philosophy is largely in line with current views, whether these emphasize the reform of theology, the capacity for abstract generalization, totalizing explanations, counter-intuitive hypotheses driven by argument, or commitment to critical inquiry. Some of the thinkers incline more to science and to findings broadly reliant on observation. Others call the appearances of things into question, and adumbrate thoughts that will much later be grist to the sceptics' mill. With Parmenides and his fellow Eleatics, we can observe logic and metaphysics in the making. We find cosmological models that are breathtaking in their boldness, incipient ideas of an evolving and self-regulating universe, systematic in its structure and basic ingredients. Distinctions are drawn between nature and convention, setting the stage for investigation into the foundations of language,

social practices, and justice. Truth is objectified by some and relativized by others. Throughout the period discussed in this book a sense of intellectual excitement and challenge is palpable. One theory succeeds and competes with another. The accounts of "all things" have little basis in measurement or the rigorous checks and controls we associate with physics. Yet, as the period advances, culminating in Democritean atomism, one scientific theory of astonishing prescience is formulated – the theory that nature's basic structure is nothing more than matter in motion.

Why all this happened when and where it did is a question both fascinating to raise and impossible to answer with any degree of precision. Numerous factors can be adduced, among which some of the most telling (in no order of priority) are political freedom and opportunity for debate, interstate trade and communication with the older civilizations of Egypt and Asia, the rise of literacy, codification of laws, dissatisfaction with anthropomorphic myths, the prizing of innovation and self-assertion, a general interest in verbal dexterity, skill that can withstand competition, a perceived need for higher education, anxieties about the nature of human identity and its place both in the world and after death.³⁴ All this is relevant to our understanding of the cultural context and content of early Greek philosophy; but whatever we say about that, we should not let our proper wonder at it lapse into talk about the Greeks' peculiar genius. This book does not attempt to make any comparisons between early Greek intellectual life and that of neighbouring cultures, but that is due entirely to exigency of space and the need to impose manageable limits on any history.

The Greeks themselves acknowledged their newness relative to the much older civilizations of Egypt and Asia, and the indebtedness of their early mathematics and astronomy to Egypt and Babylon.³⁵ It is virtually certain that Thales and his fellow Ionians knew and were influenced by near-eastern accounts of the world's origin. For the purposes of this book, the important questions are not, who said something like this first or where did X get this idea from, but what Heraclitus and the rest did with their own thoughts (however those thoughts arose), and in what context they situated themselves and their audience. Globally speaking, the Greeks were not the only ancient people to start philosophizing.³⁶ The importance of their start is twofold – its position at the beginning of the

European tradition of philosophy, and the kind of philosophy that it initiated.

People often use the word "tradition" rather loosely, to signify a long-standing set of practices whose historical phases are successively connected rather than cumulative and symbiotic. From its earliest Greek beginnings, the tradition in western philosophy has been of the latter kind, with new questions, conjectures, and refutations continuously feeding off, revisiting, and revising earlier theories and methodologies. If there is progress in philosophy, it largely proceeds by such dialectical encounters with the tradition, whether or not the current participants acknowledge that relationship. It is also part and parcel of good philosophy to treat its earlier contributors as partners whom we can engage in fruitful conversation, especially when we allow for the historical contingencies that distance them from us and help to shape their outlook. If such conversations elide history and context, they tend to become polemical, artificial, and myopic, a failing that I hope this book has completely avoided. Contextualising early Greek philosophy, in the ways our contributors try to do, was not a Graeco-Roman practice, but enlisting past philosophers in present inquiries has a pedigree that is an essential part of the Greek tradition. It was beautifully expressed by Aristotle, when he wrote:³⁷

The investigation of the truth is in one way hard, in another easy. An indication of this is found in the fact that no one is able to attain the truth adequately, while, on the other hand, no one fails entirely, but everyone says something true about the nature of things, and while individually they contribute little or nothing to the truth, by the union of all a considerable amount is amassed.

Early Greek philosophy was both the beginning of the ancient tradition and also an integral part of its subsequent phases. Plato's later thought cannot be captured in a sentence or two, but it clearly involves his acknowledgment that a coherent account of the world must come to terms both with Eleatic uniformity and stability on the one hand and Heraclitean contrarities and flux on the other. Aristotle systematically discusses the early Greek philosophers in his critical review of the data that a scientific inquirer must take into consideration. When the post-Aristotelian schools are founded, Democritean atomism is launched on a new life by Epicurus, while Zeno of Citium and Cleanthes, the earliest heads of the Stoa, look

closely to Heraclitus in formulating their physics and theology. At the same time, when scepticism too becomes an acknowledged stance, first with Pyrrho and then in the post-Platonic Academy, Xenophanes, Protagoras, and Democritus, are invoked as being at least partial precursors. Pythagoreanism has a future that will be increasingly potent in the early Christian era, and its numerology was already embraced by the earliest Platonists.

Apart from such obvious indications of the early Greek philosophers' after-life, some of their salient doctrines become virtually axiomatic for all their successors who are not sceptics. These include the Parmenidean principle that reality as such cannot be reduced to or simply identified with everyday appearances; the Empedoclean selection of earth, air, fire, and water as primary elements; and above all, the assumption that the world as a whole is an intelligible structure with underlying principles that are accessible to human understanding. By the end of our period, with such figures as Democritus, Anaxagoras and Diogenes of Apollonia, the stage is set for the great cosmological issue that will in due course unite Platonists, Aristotelians, and Stoics against the atomistic Epicureans – the issue of whether the world is governed by a purposive mind or by purely mechanistic forces. In the areas of psychology and epistemology too, theories of the early Greek philosophers continue to influence later Greek thinkers, as, for instance, in debates about the composition of the soul or the reliability of sense perception.

Even outside the philosophical tradition itself, early Greek philosophers have captured the imagination of modern writers: Matthew Arnold wrote "Empedocles on Etna," one of his most ambitious poems; T. S. Eliot prefaced his *Four Quartets* with two citations from Heraclitus; Tom Stoppard, in his play *Jumpers*, recalls Zeno's arrow, which unfortunately kills a hare, and thus invokes another Zenonian paradox; Karl Marx wrote his doctoral dissertation on the differences between Epicurus and Democritus; and Oswald Spengler, author of *The Decline of the West*, wrote his dissertation on Heraclitus. These are but a few indications of early Greek philosophy's extraordinary impact on our cultural sensibility.

NOTES

- 1 See Mourelatos [155] 3: "No other field offers as inviting a challenge to the philosophical imagination, yet in as demanding an environment of

evidential and interpretive controls.” (Bibliographical citations in this numbered form refer to the serial bibliography at the end of the volume.)

- 2 See Heidegger [152]; Popper [122]; and Cambiano [86].
- 3 See especially Burnet [6] ch. 1; Cornford [89]; Vlastos [187], [482]; Jaeger [481]; Kirk [123]. Comparison of the introductory pages of the following books will give a good sense of the different approaches of leading interpreters: Guthrie [15], Hussey [13], Barnes [14], and cf. Lloyd [124] 100–104.
- 4 In later antiquity, Pythagoras was credited with being the first to use the word “philosophy” and to call himself a “philosopher” (D. L. I.12). Even if this is accurate, it would be quite wrong to take the words in other than their literal sense, “love(r) of wisdom,” without any technical or professional connotations. For further remarks on the fluidity of philosophy at this date, see Lloyd [154] 102–103.
- 5 The artificiality of excluding Hippocratic medicine from the history of early Greek philosophy has been eloquently argued in numerous works by Geoffrey Lloyd: see Lloyd [110], [111], and [154].
- 6 For instance Zeller [18]; Burnet [6]; Guthrie [15]; [16]; KRS [4], and largely Hussey [13]. An important exception is Barnes [14] whose massive study includes chapters on psychology, epistemology, ethics, and more.
- 7 See in this volume Algra, p. 50, and Graham, p. 176.
- 8 That view is particularly prominent in Burnet [6], and it is also emphasized in KRS [4]. This explains why both books exclude the sophists.
- 9 For an excellent justification of making the sophists integral to early Greek philosophy, see Kerferd [433] 2–14, where the history of modern misinterpretations is illuminatingly illustrated.
- 10 Diels [1]. For discussion of Diels’ seminal work on early Greek philosophy, see Mansfeld in this volume p. 23, with much more detail in Mansfeld and Runia [27].
- 11 My translation of Kranz in Diels [1] vol. I, viii. Although Diels seems to have been the first to write a book with “Presocratics” in its title, the concept the term expresses is decisive in Eduard Zeller’s great history of Greek philosophy, which strongly influenced Diels, as it has everyone since. Part I of Zeller’s work (= Zeller [18]) concludes with the sophists, and he begins his Part II with Socrates. Zeller in turn was much influenced by Hegel [22], but Hegel’s “first period, second division” comprises the sophists, Socrates, and the Socratic philosophers other than Plato and Xenophon.
- 12 Burnet [6] I n.1 already registers this complaint.
- 13 See Kahn [416].
- 14 See Most in this volume p. 332.

- 15 *Metaph.* I.6 987a29–b7. See also *Metaph.* XIII.4 1078b17–31, where Aristotle identifies Socrates' special contribution not with ethics but with inductive arguments and universal definition. It is doubtful whether Aristotle has any authority for saying this other than inference from Plato's early dialogues.
- 16 Opposition between pre-Platonic and pre-Socratic runs through the nineteenth century in German scholarship; see Most's article, cited in n.1 of his chapter in this volume, p. 360.
- 17 See D. L. I.18–19.
- 18 D. L. I.14. Diogenes' preface is the best evidence we have for ancient classifications of philosophers, divisions of philosophy, and how the whole tradition might be viewed in the later Roman Empire.
- 19 On Zeller, see n.11.
- 20 See H. Schibli, *Pherekydes of Skiros* (Oxford, 1990).
- 21 Most standard histories of early Greek philosophy include some discussion of "forerunners," the fullest being KRS [4]. Barnes [14] is the most austere, barely mentioning Hesiod and finding Pherecydes of "no philosophical interest." In this volume, exigencies of space are the main reason for restricting discussion of what, for want of a better term, we call forerunners. See, however, Algra, p. 45, Broadie, p. 205, Leshner, p. 225, and especially Most, p. 342.
- 22 Xenophanes is generally construed to be saying: "No man will ever have knowledge about . . . everything of which I speak." But the grammar also permits the construal ". . . knowledge of . . . all that I say about all things" (see Guthrie [15] 395 n. 3), which makes a more pointed statement in the context. I follow Leshner (in this volume, p. 229) in taking the Greek this way.
- 23 For Xenophanes' use of "all things," see Broadie and Leshner in this volume, pp. 211, 229. Notice that Parmenides' goddess tells her youthful addressee that he is to learn "all things" (DK 28 B1.28), and this expression is ubiquitous in Empedocles, Anaxagoras, and Philolaus.
- 24 I am grateful to David Sedley for this point, and for his calling attention to the absence of Homer from Heraclitus' list. Heraclitus does criticize Homer elsewhere, but he probably did not take him (as allegorists later did) to be a didactic polymath who gave a universalist account of the world.
- 25 For objections to this approach to the material, see Long [305] 127–32, and cf. Cherniss [87].
- 26 See Kahn [162] 109–13, KRS [4] 141–42, and Guthrie [15] 101–104.
- 27 See in this volume Algra, p. 59, and Laks, p. 252.
- 28 D. L. II.11. See Most in this volume, p. 340.
- 29 Plato, *Gorg.* 449b–c, *Hippias minor* 363c–369a, *Hippias major* 285b, and *Prot.* 318e; cf. Lloyd [111] 91–95.

- 30 Popper [122] 130.
- 31 Pierre Hadot. See his *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford/Cambridge, Mass. 1995) and *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* (Paris, 1995).
- 32 Euripides, fr. 910. The passage, from an unknown play, is cited in Greek by Burnet [6] 10; my translation.
- 33 In characterizing early Greek philosophy as I have done, I do not presume to speak for my fellow contributors. They have gone along with my preference to avoid the term "Presocratic," but it should not be assumed that they endorse the reservations about it that I have expressed.
- 34 My only distinctive contribution to this list is the last point concerning anxiety. The most sustained and careful treatment of social factors that may have helped to promote early Greek philosophy, and make it culturally distinctive, is the work of Lloyd; see especially Lloyd [110], [111], [154] 121–40.
- 35 See Herodotus II.109 and Aristotle, *Metaph.* I.1 981b23.
- 36 The question of which people originated philosophy was already debated among the Greeks; some assigned it to foreign peoples and others insisted on its Hellenic origin. See D. L. I.1–11.
- 37 *Metaph.* II.1 993a30–4, transl. W. D. Ross, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. J. Barnes (Oxford, 1984).